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IRONSIDE

BY JIM THOMPSON

A powerful novel of a crime beyond belief—
introducing Robert Ironside, detective extraordinary

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NBC-TV SERIES
STARRING
RAYMOND BURR



DEATH-THRUST

The house was pitch-black and so soundless that Ironside could almost hear the silence shriek. Yet he knew someone waited in the shadows—someone who had killed and would kill again.

Suddenly from behind him, maniacal hands propelled his wheelchair toward the elevator. He fumbled frantically around and faced an empty darkness where the elevator should have been. It was gone, descended three floors into the depths below.

Behind him echoed a maddened laugh, followed by a powerful thrust which would catapult him downward—downward to destruction.

Based on the television series IRONSIDE created by Collier Young.

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by **Jim Thompson**

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I

• It was the kind of a place where if you didn't spit on the floor at home you could go down there and do it. The smell was thick enough to write your name on (if you were still using your own name)—the aroma of stale beer and cheap wine and cloying sweat, colored and given body by the gut-like strands of cigarette smoke. In the nearly opaque night-fog of San Francisco, the place could hardly be seen from the outside. But the smell from the interior pointed an invisible finger at it. And even in the distance of the bay, the ferries and tugs seemed to acknowledge it with sickish and shuddery hoots.

From somewhere in the smoke and stench, an unreasonable facsimile of a piano player was doing his own arrangement of "Goofus." It had to be his own; no one else would have claimed it. At the bar, a rail-thin man sipped muscatel and surreptitiously counted the cigarettes in his package. At one of the small, smeared tables, which seemed splattered rather than scattered around the sawdust-covered floor, a bloated-faced woman made an apparently endless appeal to a thin-lipped young man who apparently rejected her endlessly.

The Killer sat at the rear of the room, facing the door. He was drinking coffee—coffee which had been especially

and carefully brewed for him. Although the fact was somehow not noticeable—the Killer had a quality of unnoticeability—the hand which held the coffee cup was gloved. Also gloved was the hand which occasionally lifted a cigarette to his mouth. Both gloves were drawn skintight, flexing and shifting easily with the movements of the flesh and bone which they covered.

Tolerantly, which is not to say approvingly, the Killer effortlessly absorbed the sights and sounds of the saloon. The unforgivable stench. The unmusical music. The irredeemable people. He understood such places—the reason for their being. He understood their habitués—the myriad dark byways which had brought them here. He understood so he did not condemn, just as he would not have condemned a hole or the poisonous snakes which populated it. Just as God would not have condemned his own creations.

The Killer's condemnation was reserved for creatures of free will. For those who might have done very well and had, perversely, done very badly. As with God (reputedly), the Killer had tolerance and understanding for the hapless evil of predestination. But for the willful doer of evil, the Killer had nothing but death.

What did the Killer look like? Well, what does God look like? Presumably, having been made in God's image, the Killer looked about like anyone else. A grocery clerk. An accountant. An installment collector. A doctor, lawyer, merchant, thief—no, strike that last! Definitely, strike it.

The Killer did not look like a thief or any other kind of criminal. On the contrary, having been chosen as the instrument of God's wrath (in his own mind), perhaps even *being* God (in his own mind), the Killer wore a protective cloak of innocuousness. What he looked like was anything but what he was.

Probably the denizens of this place he was in tonight—one which he patronized frequently—surmised the truth about him. But it was a matter of sensing rather than knowing. Throughout their shoddy lives they had lived in death's shadow, so they sensed its physical embodiment in the Killer. More than that, they were grateful for his tolerant abiding of them, and were venomously pleased that another outsider was to be struck down tonight.

Why not, anyway? What gave with this brother's-keeper

gig? Maybe they'd look into it when it became a two-way street. In the meantime, however, their concern was only for Mr. Jones or Mr. Smith or Mr. Brown or whatever he chose to call himself, a guy who was fast with the big buck and who always made it easy for you to swallow.

The Killer came out of his reverie. He caught the bartender's eye and nodded imperceptibly. The bartender promptly became active, moving up and down the bar and around the room, and within minutes a miracle had taken place. The piano player became expert. The muscatel drinker ceased to count his cigarettes. The thin-lipped young man nodded and smiled to the bloated-faced woman. God taketh away, but he also giveth—money and all the good things which money buys—white powder and young flesh and booze, and all else desirable. And Mr. Jones or Mr. Brown or Mr. Smith—the Killer, the God, had given unto them once again.

They did not openly express their gratitude, of course. The Killer would not have liked that, nor was it necessary. For, having been aware of their need, he would also be aware of their gratitude. Besides which there were better ways of showing their appreciation. Ways which they were on the point of having to demonstrate, for the Killer's victim had just entered the place.

She was twenty-four years old. As a human being, she wasn't worth a plugged nickel. But the bank and tax authorities assayed her at approximately 16 million dollars. Her maiden name, reacquired after each of her five divorces, was a very distinguished one—Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm. But it was not the name which the habitués of the bar would have applied to her. They had never seen her before, but they had met all her sisters and cousins and other kindred. So they knew her name well.

They spelled it t-r-a-m-p.

Penetrating the smoke, her eyes swept over them contemptuously, then settled on the Killer. He struck a match, lighted a cigarette with it, then very carefully blew it out. Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm tightened her savagely imperious mouth, and crossed swiftly to his table. She sat down opposite him and leaned across the table, careless of any soiling of her five-hundred-dollar slack suit or her one-hundred-fifty-dollar sweater. And then she began to talk. She talked steadily for almost five minutes.

Nothing that she said was printable. At least, it is seldom seen in print except on toilet walls. The substance of her discourse (to put it in the politest possible terms) was that anyone who thought she would hold still for blackmail was too stupid to know pea soup from pineapple juice, and that she personally was able and willing to kick his butt through his brains.

The Killer listened to her with a deepening frown. When she had finished, he said he didn't have the slightest idea what she was talking about.

"I just dropped in here for a drink, and you make these outrageous charges against me. Just why—"

"You signaled me, that's why! When you lighted your cigarette!"

"Signaled you by lighting a cigarette? Now, really, miss."

"Well . . ." Miss Chisholm hesitated a moment. "Don't kid me, buster! You came here to meet me! To collect a payoff! What else would you be doing here?"

The Killer shrugged idly. What was anyone doing here? he asked. What was she doing here? Miss Chisholm snorted that he knew damned well what she was doing there. And taking a folded sheet of paper from her purse, she slammed it down in front of him.

"Look." She smoothed it out for him to read. "Now, tell me you didn't send me that!"

The Killer studied the paper, its message composed of words and letters cut from newsprint. When he had finished, he looked up puzzledly.

"This says you starred in some kind of movie."

"Yeah, doesn't it, though!"

"Well? I'm afraid I don't see . . ."

Miss Chisholm leaned closer to him. "Now, listen," she said harshly, lowering her voice a little, "I don't know how you found out . . . how you guessed. . . . I was wearing a mask, and—" She broke off, her tone becoming harsher still. "But I'm not paying, get me? Once I start paying, I'll be paying forever!"

The Killer remarked that he saw nothing in the note about a demand for money. Miss Chisholm said that he thought he was pretty damned cute, didn't he?

"You let me worry a few days! Then you put the bite on me over the phone! Well, all I've got to say—"

"I called you? You're saying that I called you?"

"Well . . . well, all right! Maybe I can't prove it. But I'm warning you—"

"Don't," the Killer said. "Just go to the police. That's what you should have done in the first place."

Miss Chisholm said nuts to the police (or words to that effect). She was plenty able to handle any blackmailer by herself, and he'd better believe it.

"How?" the Killer asked.

"Never you mind how! You try pulling something like this again—"

"I really don't know what you're talking about, miss. I honestly don't." The Killer grinned at her. "Now, why don't you let me call the police for you, and we'll get this settled right now."

Miss Chisholm stared at him. She started to say something, and changed her mind. She made a second start at saying something, and again changed her mind.

He continued to grin at her. Her gaze moved uneasily around the room, and met with other knowing grins. A sense of helplessness seeped into her body. The all-gone feeling of one who has bet everything on a bluff, and had the bluff called. At the same time, she was intrigued, her satiated emotions titillated for the first time in years.

So? So! But it was kind of a kick, wasn't it? And a gal had to pay for her kicks, didn't she?

That stag movie had seemed safe enough. Everyone connected with it had had as much to lose from discovery as she. And thinking about it, thinking about the thousands upon thousands of men who would sit popeyed and slaver-ing as they watched . . .

A kick. The kind of kick that would set you tingling delightfully each time you thought about it. A real kick—and that was what life was all about, wasn't it? A search for bigger and better kicks?

Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm looked at the Killer, and suggested that he put it on the line for her. "It's the only way I can play, right? Unless you admit you're putting the squeeze on me . . ."

"You've made a mistake," the Killer said mildly. "I think you'd better leave."

"Huh? But—"

"By the way, I believe you dropped something there on the floor. A key, isn't it?"

It was a key. A key with a room tag on it. She picked it up, and examined it, then followed the direction of the Killer's gaze. He was glancing over his shoulder at a small neon sign with the single word Rooms. Beneath it was an arrow pointing toward a rear door.

"Yes," the Killer intoned. "You'd better leave immediately. And don't forget to take your package with you."

A small sack flipped under the table, and landed in Miss Chisholm's lap. She glanced inside it briefly, and a sudden flush flooded her patrician features.

But, wow! This promised to be something else again!

She stood up, her breasts rising and falling with excitement. "You're right," she said. "I'll leave now." And she went past the sign and out the back door.

The Killer took his time about joining her, first finishing his coffee and making a telephone call. When he finally entered the rickety cabin—one of several behind the saloon—she was already out of her clothes and dressed in the tiny bikini he had given her.

Grinning lewdly, she looked down at herself, then raised sultry eyes to his. She came toward him a step, arms outstretched. The Killer shook his head and pointed toward the bathroom.

Miss Chisholm frowned; pouted. Then, hips swinging, she entered the bathroom.

The Killer took off his shoes, socks and outer garments. After primly buttoning each button of his long, old-fashioned underwear, he also went into the bathroom. He turned on the water in the shower, turning it on full blast. Pushing Miss Chisholm ahead of him, he stepped under it with her.

They talked above the roar of the water.

"You were afraid I might be bugged? Carrying some kind of transmitter."

"I can't take any chances."

"I've got the ten thousand in my bag. The bills aren't marked, either."

"Naturally. There'd be no point in marking them unless you'd called in the police."

"How did you recognize me in the picture? With a mask on, I mean?"

"You're in the newspapers a lot. I've studied countless pictures of you through a magnifying glass."

"Yes?"

"You've moved from one thrill to another, on a descending scale. It was only a matter of time until you hit bottom. I was on the lookout for you when you finally landed."

"But the mask . . ."

"It didn't cover your ears. Something as distinctive as fingerprints. It didn't cover this or this or that." The Killer pointed to various small blemishes on her face and body. "I've made people like you my business, Miss Chisholm. It's hard work, but I almost never have a failure."

"I'd say it paid pretty well."

"The money is only incidental. I use it all for carrying on my work."

"Mmm? Then maybe you're entitled to a little bonus." Miss Chisholm leaned toward him invitingly. "Well?"

"Certainly not! Do you think I'm as filthy as you are?"

"Wha—" She drew herself up, glaring, then suddenly laughed hoarsely. "You're cute, you know it? A real kick in the head. When do I make the next payoff?"

The Killer said there would be no next one. The ten thousand was not only the first but final payment. "We won't be seeing each other again, Miss Chisholm. Now, if you'd like to get out and get dressed, I'll fix us a drink."

"But—but, I just don't get it. You mean, this is all? The whole ball of wax?"

"This is all. Unless," the Killer added politely, "you'd like me to wash your back."



• The truck had a high-speed engine, and a custom-built van body. It rolled noiselessly into the police garage and came to a gentle stop. The young Negro driver hopped down from his seat and trotted around to the rear doors. He opened them. Lights went on, revealing the interior of the van—a surprising contrast to the vehicle's humble-looking exterior.

There was a radio telephone, a desk, a small laboratory. There was a sink with hot and cold running water, and a two-burner stove. Concealed behind a sliding panel, there was even a bar of sorts, with a nice assortment of bottles, and a miniscule refrigerator. Last but by no means least was the van's most important fixture—a huskily handsome giant of a man, whose great bulk overflowed the wheelchair to which he was confined and would always be confined.

He was Robert T. Ironside, formerly chief of detectives of the San Francisco Police Department. Now, since the criminal act which had crippled him, he served as consultant to the city's police commissioner and worked on special assignment from the commissioner. He was also solely responsible to that official.

The young Negro's name was Sanger, Mark Sanger. Once a suspect in the sniping which had permanently crippled

Ironside, he now served as the latter's chauffeur, companion and all-around helper. Life had treated Mark Sanger badly up until the time of his meeting with Robert Ironside. A juvenile delinquent from a broken home, he might easily have ended his days behind bars or the small green door of the gas chamber. But the gruff-talking, rough-mannered detective had intervened; giving him a job, seeing to it that he attended school. Thus, a new life had opened up for Mark, and he could now hold up his head with any man. Ironside had made life worth living for Mark. In his gratitude, the young Negro returned the favor insofar as he could: doing everything possible to mitigate and lessen his employer's handicap, unobtrusively easing the burdens of the crippled man's life.

Naturally, a deep bond of affection existed between the two men. But it was *between* them, a private thing, never for a moment to be worn on the surface. Any hint of their true feelings would have been unbearably embarrassing to either man. Their surface attitude was one of mere tolerance—of almost incessant jeering and bantering and grumbling at one another.

Now, as Mark raised and lowered the elevator-step of the van, bringing the wheelchair and its occupant down to the garage floor, Chief Ironside assured the young man that the latter was out of his flamin' mind.

"Flamin' engine's runnin' perfectly," he scolded. "What d'you mean draggin' me out to listen to it right at dinner-time?"

"Dinner, humph!" Mark grunted. "Better off without none, the way you eat."

"Better off without *any*! Can't you ever learn any flamin' grammar?"

"That's what I said—better off without none." Mark wheeled him onto the elevator and pressed the up button. "Honest, boss, don't you ever eat *anything* but chili?"

Ironside roundly declared that chili was a perfect diet. It contained all the nutriments necessary for a healthful existence. "And what about that engine?" he demanded, suddenly remembering the reason for their recent excursion. "What do you mean tellin' me it was making a lot of noise?"

"You just couldn't hear it," Mark said. "All that chili's eaten out your eardrums."

Chief Ironside's apartment was above the police garage,

a former storeroom which had been converted into living quarters after his crippling by the sniper. Its main room served in several capacities—as an office, a living room, a dining room and kitchen. From an aesthetic standpoint, it left much to be desired; a vast, barnlike area which would have given an interior decorator nightmares. But for a man living without legs, a man who had to be wheeled or otherwise conveyed wherever he went, it was well-nigh perfect. Uncrowded, plenty of room to move about without bumping into things. As close to transportation as the elevator. Convenience and privacy: being able to get around without a lot of flamin' fools gawking at him. What more could a man ask of an apartment?

The elevator door rolled open, and Mark wheeled him out into the main room. And Chief Ironside immediately found something to ask for.

"The lights," he demanded of the darkness. "What's wrong with the flamin' lights?"

"You just hush," Mark's voice came to him from several feet away. "Be some light in a minute."

"Huh? Where you goin', anyway? What's goin' on here?"

"Take it easy," Mark cautioned from an even greater distance. "Try seein' how it feels with your jaws closed for a change."

Chief Ironside tried to raise himself from his chair; he let out an angry bellow. "Now, by all the flamin' saints—"

There was a flick of a match, then the lights went on. A light, rather. It came from an enormous candle in the dining-room area. The candle sat atop a gallonsize can of chili. Ranged around the table were his three best friends—his three trusted co-workers: Mark Sanger, Detective Sergeant Ed Brown and Policewoman Eve Whitfield. They spoke in unison, beaming at him out of their fresh, young faces:

"Happy birthday, Chief."

Chief Ironside blinked. He swallowed heavily and managed a ferocious scowl; did some throaty mumbling and grumbling about flamin' nonsense and people who should be old enough to have good sense. Finally, having established that he was not a man to be touched by sentiment, he allowed himself to take note of the bottle which stood beside the chili can.

"Well, open it up!" he roared. "Did you just bring it here

to look at? Can't a man get anyone to drink with him on his own birthday?"

"How about me?" Mark said. "I get a drink, too?"

"You do not. You have to go to school tonight."

"Humph. But I get some chili, huh?"

"Why, certainly," Robert Ironside declared generously.

"You can even have extra helpings."

III

• The birthday party was over. Mark Sanger had taken his books, and gone off to night school. Eve Whitfield was in the kitchen area, cleaning up the last of the dishes. Sergeant Ed Brown was having a final drink with Chief Ironside. As they talked, Ironside's eyes and his thoughts strayed frequently to Eve—only to be yanked away from her just as frequently, their owner cursing them silently for their misbehavior.

It wasn't to be thought of. Never, ever, for even a moment. She was his protégée, as was Mark Sanger and Ed Brown. Like them, she was part of his "family," the only family he had or wanted. He had brought them all together, pulling them out of their own lives and making them part of his. And it was his sacred obligation to see that none of them suffered for it.

Eve was a member of one of San Francisco's first families, a society girl who had been taking a fling at police reporting when she first caught Ironside's attention. He had pointed out, not unreasonably, that there was no point in wading when she could be swimming. He had asked, not unreasonably, why a smart girl should be writing about what people did when she could be doing it herself. So, after some similarly blunt questionings and promptings, Eve Whitfield had come into the department—*his* department. And it was

unthinkable that she should ever leave it. As unthinkable as it was that he should ever give her any cause to do so—any cause for embarrassment or discomfort. Such as, for example, amorous advances from a man who was ten-plus years older than she and permanently crippled besides.

There had been hints that she might not mind such advances. That she would even welcome them. There had been hints that she had joined the department with such an end in mind. Which mattered not a flaming damn to Bob Ironside.

Eve, like the others, was his responsibility. He was obligated to see that she got nothing but the best from life, and the best was certainly not marriage to the likes of him.

She finished the dishes and came out to them, murmuring that she guessed she'd better say good-night.

"Unless I can do something for you, Chief. Like me to fix you another drink?"

"Got plenty," he grunted, not looking at her. "You run along, an'—an', uh, thanks, Eve. Nice party."

"I could stay and talk a while, if you like. I'm supposed to go to a wedding, the younger sister of a girl I went to Vassar with. But—"

"Spare us the flamin' details," Ironside said. "We'll read about it in the newspapers."

"Well . . . if you're sure. I don't have to be there until nine, and—"

"Will this woman never leave?" Ironside groaned. "First she plies me with drink, and now she tries to talk me to death."

Eve laughed and departed. Ed Brown fixed drinks for himself and his chief.

"Now, you were saying . . ." Ironside prompted him, ". . . about that hit-and-run case the commissioner assigned us . . ."

"Chisholm," Brown nodded. "Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm. I'd say we were about wrapped up on our end of it."

"Took you long enough. What'd you do—take a trip to Bermuda or somethin'?"

"You'd gripe if they hung you with a new rope," Ed chuckled. "It's approximately twenty hours since she was killed, and we've practically got it in the bag. Nothing much left to do but turn it over to the lab boys, and let them finger our hit-and-runner."

"Well . . ." Ironside hesitated grudgingly. "Guess that's not too bad—for a beginner."

Brown slapped his forehead in mock despair. The phone rang and he started toward it, then brought himself up short with an effort. Chief Ironside was already rolling his chair toward the phone. Touchy about his disability, he resented help in doing things that he could do for himself.

Ironside picked up the phone, spoke into it. Brown heard him grunt with surprise and displeasure.

"Huh? . . . Well, what for? . . . Not workin' hours, y'know. Hardly the time of night to . . . Yes."—very sharply. "Well, that's for me to say, isn't it? . . . Well, all right. . . . All right. . . . In fifteen minutes."

Ironside slammed down the receiver, spun the chair around and came back to Brown.

"Got some company comin'," he announced. "The DA, and one of his oldest and dearest friends—it says here."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Coleman Duke—ever hear of him?"

It was a rhetorical question. Coleman Duke was one of the big names of the shipping industry. "I've heard of his son, too," said Sergeant Brown, "in case you were going to ask me."

"Babe Duke!" Ironside snorted disgustedly. "Lummox is almost thirty years old, and they call him Babe! Manslaughter drunk driving, right?"

"Reduced to misdemeanor. Driving while under the influence. Then there was a case before that—"

"Fleeing the scene of an accident. Flight to avoid arrest. Felony—reduced to misdemeanor."

"Well," Brown shrugged, "he seems to have been behaving himself recently."

"Has he? With the DA coming up here, and bringing Papa Duke along?"

"Well, I don't know of anything that—" Ed Brown broke off, glanced sharply at Ironside. "Eleanor Chisholm! He fits the pattern to a T!"

Ironside nodded grimly. "Hit-and-run and Babe Duke. Go together like ham and eggs. You'd better get out of here, Ed."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. The DA and Coleman are due here in fifteen minutes, and I've got things to do before they arrive."

Sergeant Brown departed.

Robert Ironside freshened his drink and reached for the telephone.

And in another part of town, Mark Sanger stepped off the bus and started for night school. It was only three blocks away. He was early for class, but not as early as he liked to be. Not so long ago, wild horses couldn't have got Mark into a classroom. Now, since his association with Bob Ironside, his attitude had completely reversed itself.

He had learned the pleasure of learning. He had learned that to be accepted by smart people—people like the Chief and Ed Brown and Miss Eve—a fella had to smarten himself up. And Mark Sanger meant to hasten the smartening-up process by every means open to him. Getting to class ahead of the other students. Staying after the others had left.

Just about had to, didn't he? Had a lot of ground to cover, a lot of lost time to make up for. A man in a hurry—that was Mark Sanger.

He was crossing the last intersection before reaching school—and hurrying fast—when the hateful voice hailed him:

"Hey, Rastus!"

IV

• Mark stiffened, the short hair prickling on the back of his neck. Rastus, huh? Now there was a white man that was plumb beggin' for trouble!

Mark took a step down the dark side street, hard eyes fixed on the expensive sports roadster pulled in at the curb. Then, with a manful effort, he brought himself to a stop.

Chief Ironside had said it right. Only a fool lets fools upset him. All the fools there were in the world, a man wouldn't ever get nothin' else done if he let 'em get to him.

Mark saw that the roadster was sagged on one side, as though the right front tire was flat. Behind the steering wheel, he caught a glimpse of a man's shoulders and a tousled blonde head. A woman was crowded close to the man, her hand toying with his hair. She kissed him with a wet, smacking sound, let out a jeering laugh:

"I don't think the cat heard you, Chucky-boy. Why don't you call him again?"

"Why, sure, honey chile. Hey, Rastus!" The man raised his voice. "Drag yourself over here!"

Mark drew a deep, shuddery breath.

He started toward school again.

Still the same proposition, wasn't it? Just two fools instead

of one. Chief Ironside had given him the straight goods, an' it was up to Mark Sanger to follow it. Just go about his business an' pretend like—

The man called to him a third time. The words he used, very ugly ones, were not to be ignored. Not by Mark Sanger, anyway.

He turned and strode back to the car, and yanked the door open. "OK, buddy. Pile out of there!"

"Aah, now, Rastus. Just—"

"You gettin' out, or am I gettin' you out?"

The man stayed where he was, but he laughed amiably. He said he was sorry for speaking out of turn, but they'd had this car trouble, see? Some boob had sideswiped 'em, and blown out their front tire, and that was enough to kind of get a man off his temper, now, wasn't it?

"My name's Glover, Chuck Glover," he smiled, holding out his hand. "Hope you'll excuse me, Mr. . . . uh . . ."

"Mark Sanger," Mark said, and hesitantly took the other's hand. "Sorry about your trouble."

The girl leaned forward in the seat, asked poutingly if she was not to be introduced also. Chuck Glover said now of course she was going to be introduced, of course. So why didn't she just give his old friend Mark the double handshake. And the girl said, yeah, why not, anyway?

She held out her two hands, hands that were enclosed in arm-length gloves. Mark put his own hand between them.

So now both his hands were being held. *Both*. But Glover's left was free.

So, in leaning over backward to behave sensibly, in his over-anxiety to be friendly, the new Mark Sanger had done something the old one would never have done.

In his last moment of awareness, that lightning-fast, eternity-long moment, he saw them as he might have seen them through a microscope. As one with hours to study and examine might have seen them. And what he saw was . . . was . . .

The girl's face. Thick with makeup: enameled-looking, like a face painted on a doll. Drawing its only life from senseless malice.

And the man's face. A twisted, rubbery kind of face, with so much expression that it was somehow expressionless. And characterless. Man and girl—two of a kind. Thrill seekers, digging ever and ever more avidly to peer into the

bottom of the pit. And furious at finding nothing there but the bottom.

The man's fist smashed into Mark's mouth.

The blow propelled him backward, jerking him free of his captors. He fell, his head cracking painfully against the pavement. And was abruptly unconscious.

He came to to the sound of the car's powerful motor. A sound with an undercurrent of creaking and squeaking. Cautiously, he opened his eyes a little, saw that the car was slowly losing its sagging posture. One of them kind, he thought dully. Pumps up tires off'n the motor. A lotta car, a lotta money. An' nothin' better to do than play mean with people. Actin' friendly, an' then beatin' their brains out.

Feet scraped against the pavement. The girl laughed with idiot's delight. Then the man was standing over Mark, dropping several bills onto his body.

"How's that, Rastus? Huh? How's thirty bucks for you? Pretty fair pay for a punch in the puss, wouldn't you say?"

"Yassuh, Boss," Mark mumbled dopily. "Thass suah plenty fine, Boss, thank you kinely, suh."

"You're sure, now?" the man insisted. "Sure you wouldn't like a little kick in the ribs for dessert?"

Mark murmured servilely that it wasn't up to him to say; white man wanted to kick him, he reckoned he'd get kicked.

"Do it!" the girl exclaimed. "Kick him hard, Chuck."

"Well, now." The man appeared reluctant. "Seems like a pretty good cat, honey. Maybe we just better take off before the cops or someone shows."

"Go on! Just one big kick before we leave!"

"Well. As long as you put it that way . . ."

He drew his foot back, swung it forward in a vicious arc. It landed—on nothingness; throwing him off-balance, as Mark suddenly rolled and sprang to his feet.

The man backed away, lips working in wordless terror. He threw up his hands protectively as Mark feinted at his face, then groaned and doubled as a blow landed in his stomach. Mark righted him with an uppercut; landed six rapid-fire jabs in the face. To the mouth, the eyes, the nose. He went on jabbing at them, closing both eyes, flattening the nose, making a bloody mess of the mouth. Because maybe he wasn't mad enough to kill the man, but he was sure gonna make him know he'd been in a fight.

The girl was screaming. She leaped out of the car and ran, leaving a trail of shrill, terrified screams behind her. In the shabby block, a semi-industrial district, lights were coming on. Mark decided he'd done about enough. The man was out on his feet, his face practically pounded to hamburger. That was plenty enough, and then some.

He lowered his hands, and turned away.

It was his second big mistake of the night.

He never knew what hit him, but it sure did the job. He went out like Lottie's eye, and it took two cops and an ambulance driver to wake him up.

Meanwhile, Coleman Duke and the district attorney had arrived at Chief Ironside's apartment.

V

• Coleman Duke had an incredibly tanned face, a lustrous headful of iron-gray hair and a crisp military mustache. His teeth (his own) were beautifully white and even. His eyes were deceptively soft, and his voice seemed filtered through some amusing secret. Warm, good-humored—serious, of course, when seriousness was called for, but generally tuned to the happy things in life.

District Attorney Wayne Billington, on the other hand, might have posed as front man for a mortuary. A professional consoler of the bereaved. Newspaper reporters and other unkindly people had dubbed him "Crying Billie" and "Wayne the Weeper," and charged him with mourning his way into a long string of convictions. Once Billington turned on the tears, they said, a defendant was halfway to San Quentin.

Such statements and their authors deeply saddened the district attorney. He said that they were patently the words of twisted and evil men, and it wrenched his heart to think of the wretched fate which must inevitably be theirs.

Now, after introducing Coleman Duke, he again shook Ironside's hand, clinging to it as he assured the Chief that he would never forgive himself for his shocking lapse of memory.

"I'm mortified, Bob! *Heartsick!* How could I possibly have forgotten that today was your birthday?"

"How could you possibly have remembered it?" Ironside asked dryly, "when you couldn't possibly have known when it was?"

The district attorney didn't seem to hear him. "I'm ashamed of myself, Bob. I wish I could do something to make up for it. Coleman,"—he slid a meaningful glance at the shipping magnate, "couldn't we do something about a birthday remembrance, even now? Better late than never, wouldn't you say?"

Duke's deceptively warm eyes flicked over Ironside's face and made an immediate and accurate appraisal. "I'm afraid not," he smiled. "I suspect Chief Ironside wouldn't accept it in the spirit in which it was offered."

"What?" The DA blinked. "Oh, now, I'm sure Bob wouldn't think that—"

"Bob just might think that," Ironside said. "So why don't we drop the subject?"

"Right," Duke said heartily. "Chief Ironside doesn't accept bribes—or anything that might remotely be construed as such. And I never give bribes."

Ironside grinned, then laughed openly. "What, never?" he asked.

"Well . . ." Again that lightning-quick, unerringly accurate appraisal. "Well, *hardly* ever."

And then Duke's own warm laughter joined in with Ironside's. "You too, hmm? You know, *Pinafore* has always been one of my favorites, Chief."

"When it comes to Gilbert and Sullivan," Ironside said, "I'm afraid I have no favorites."

"Spoken like a true Savoyard! Wayne,"—Duke sidled a mock-reproachful glance at the district attorney—"you've been keeping things from me! Chief Ironside is a man of parts, not just another police detective."

Ironside murmured deprecatingly, urged his guests to help themselves to drinks. Beaming, Coleman Duke poured a drink for himself and Billington. Things were going just as he wanted. They were also—as a point of fact—going just as Ironside wanted. There was a margin of time to be dealt with, a margin which had to be of a certain wideness. As it would be, in a few more minutes.

The district attorney beamed happily from one man to the other. "Didn't I tell you, Coleman?" he demanded eagerly. "Didn't I tell you that Bob was one hell of a guy?"

"Well, I insist on a final bit of proof," Duke smiled. "I insist that he share my box the next time we have the D'Oyly Carte company in San Francisco."

"A pleasure," Ironside said. "Unfortunately, I have a box of my own where I'm host to several friends."

Duke's expression changed ever so slightly; he said he hadn't meant to be patronizing. "Guess I'm a little over-anxious to please," he apologized. "Perhaps you've had the same experience in meeting someone for the first time?"

"Frequently. I usually overcome it with booze."

"A word to the wise." Duke's warm laughter again filled the room. "And I think I'll just act on it!"

He added more whiskey to his glass; made a gesture of roasting Ironside with it. "Your very good health—uh—Look, do we have to be so formal? I mean, why don't I call you Bob or Robert, if you prefer?"

"Bob is fine," Ironside said.

"And, of course, you'll call me Cole or Coleman."

Ironside shook his head. The safety margin had widened sufficiently. There was no longer need to stall.

"No," he said bluntly. "I'll call you Mr. Duke, or Duke, if you prefer."

"B-But—but I thought—"

"I admire you, Mr. Duke. I can understand how you started in as a water boy fifty years ago, and got to where you are today. But I can't and don't like you. I've seen too much misery and crime derive from men like you."

"Bob—!" Wayne Billington was aghast. "How can you—"

"Quiet," Coleman Duke said. "Go on, Chief."

"I intend to," Ironside said. "To be quite frank, Mr. Duke, I think you'd tie your mother to a hot stove if she had something you wanted. I think that anyone who gets in your way had better never turn his back on you again. I think that with you as a model, a man he could neither accept nor reject—your son just about had to be the complete mess that he is."

District Attorney Billington appeared on the point of bursting into tears. "Bob!" he wailed. "You've given grievous and gratuitous offense—"

Duke gestured, cutting him off again; then nodded evenly to Ironside.

"We seem to understand each other, Chief. Suppose you tell me just where you stand in the present case."

"The hit-and-run death of Eleanor Chisholm?"

"Of course."

Ironside held up a hand, "Item: the high-speed skid marks of special-type racing tires; relatively few of them sold. Item: paint samples from the car; one of two ultraexpensive foreign makes. Item: part of a broken lens from the headlight of the same car. Item . . . yes?"

"Suppose I told you that the car was stolen the day before yesterday. What would you say to that?"

"Something I'd hate to say. That you were a liar."

Billington's face sagged. Duke sighed.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said. "Or what my son tells me is the truth. I don't suppose I can blame you if you don't believe it."

"No," said Ironside. "I don't suppose you can."

"He was at a bachelor party for a friend. Someone phoned him that Miss Chisholm had to see him immediately. He doesn't know who the person was—some servant, he supposes. At any rate, he wasn't able to leave the party right away, so he had to hurry pretty fast when he did leave."

"Very fast," Ironside agreed. "A fast driver with a bellyful of booze."

"He'd been to a party," Duke shrugged. "Naturally, he'd been drinking. But getting on with the story: He'd been instructed to meet Miss Chisholm near the intersection of Crensmore and Antioch streets. A rather disreputable neighborhood, as you know, but Miss Chisholm was, uh—"

"Let's put it euphemistically and say she was a somewhat unconventional young woman. Your son wasn't surprised by the fact that she'd be in such a neighborhood."

"She was no good, Bob," Billington put in earnestly. "A wicked, wanton woman. A degenerate wastrel. A—Well, you know what she was."

Ironside said he knew what she was *now*. A corpse with its back broken in three places, its brains smeared over a block of pavement, its torso literally burst open from the terrific force of the car's impact.

Duke paled a little under his tan.

"All right, Chief," he continued quietly. "All right. Babe—my son—was on a one-way street. He was traveling almost seventy miles an hour. He'd been drinking. Things couldn't look worse for him if they'd been deliberately planned that way! That's why he was so frightened, you see. Why he failed to stop and report to the police, even though it hadn't been his fault."

"It *hadn't* been? Really, Mr. Duke."

"Let me tell you. He was supposed to meet Miss Chisholm at the intersection of Crensmore and Antioch. But he was three blocks away from there—*three blocks*, mind you—when she suddenly jumped out in front of him. Right into the path of his car. He couldn't stop. He couldn't have stopped if he'd been dead sober and traveling at the legal speed limit."

"But she wouldn't have been killed if he'd been traveling at the legal speed limit."

"Well, that's open to debate. But—"

"And the story you've told me is the one he told you. Which hardly makes it synonymous with the truth."

"Maybe it was suicide, Bob," the DA interjected. "Certainly sounds like it, doesn't it? She set up a set of circumstances which would compel poor Babe to, uh, well . . ."

His voice trailed away as the two men stared at him, wordlessly. There was a moment of heavy silence, and then Duke spoke again.

"You're right, Chief. However you look at it and regardless of the circumstances, Babe is guilty. That's a fact and it can't be changed. The only thing to do now, as I see it, is to make the best of a bad situation."

"Which is?"

"You have certain evidence. It all points to Babe, and it would only be a matter of hours before you caught up with him. You were sure he was guilty even before I came in here and admitted it."

Ironside nodded. "So?"

"So this." Coleman Duke leaned forward. "Pretend to be stalled. Temporarily at a dead end in your investigation. After all, it could happen that way, couldn't it? Investigations don't always go smoothly. Evidence is seldom as clear-cut as it is in this case. I'm not asking you to drop it, understand. Wayne would no more agree to that than you would."

"I'm sure he wouldn't," Ironside agreed. "Wayne's an honest man, a good prosecutor. He's also very much a human being, however, and human beings—which office-holders are not—can't possibly be completely objective about their friends."

"Now, Bob. . . ." Billington hesitated. "I hope you're not implying that I would misuse the law to favor a friend."

"Not in your own viewpoint, no. But the law allows you a great deal of discretion. You can prosecute virtually the same crime very severely or very lightly—or not prosecute it at all. Decide that the so-called crime was not actually one, and call for a dismissal of the charge. I think this is as it should be. I think it's one of the great virtues of our legal system. I also think, however, that Wayne has abused that discretion in his ultraliberal handling of your son."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that!" Billington snapped. "Very sorry!"

"And I'm sorry to have to say it. But getting back to you, Mr. Duke. I anticipated the reason for this visit before Wayne brought you up here. My answer is no."

"But why?" Duke frowned. "I'll give you my word, Chief. Within three hours of the time you announce that you're at a dead end in the case, my son will give himself up. Nothing will be changed. He'll still face trial and certain conviction. What possible difference can it make if—"

Ironside cut him off with an angry snort. It would make all the difference in the world, he said, and Duke flamin' well knew it!

"Your son is an irresponsible slob. Now that he feels the hot breath of the law on his neck, he wants to play the responsible citizen. An honest man, coming forward freely to admit his mistake. By so doing, he would give Wayne justification for handling his case leniently, and he'd probably get off with a fine and a suspended sentence."

Billington shook his head mournfully. "You've accused me of being unfair, Bob. Aren't you being unfair yourself? You've confessed to disliking Mr. Duke. Can you honestly say that your attitude isn't colored by that dislike?"

"I don't think so, no. Not, at any rate, to the extent that your liking for him has colored your attitude." Ironside turned to the shipping man. "Mr. Duke, I mentioned that I anticipated the reason for your coming here. So I called your

son before you arrived. He made a full confession to me. By now, thanks to your extended efforts to be ingratiating, the police have had plenty of time to get him in jail."

A muscle rippled in Coleman Duke's face. In his bronzed forehead, a blue vein swelled and throbbed. Then, with perfectly steady hands, he took out a flat, gold case, selected a cigarette from it and carefully held a lighter-flame to its tip.

"I don't imagine you stopped with that, did you?" he asked. "You didn't leave any way open to make him look good?"

"Not a one. Newspapers, radio, television—they've all been informed. The truth is out, and it can't be colored or covered up."

Wayne Billington gave him a stricken look, let his gaze shift nervously to Duke. "A rotten shame, Coleman. Babe is such a fine young man, I—"

"He's a bum," Duke said flatly. "A stinker from the word go. But he's my son, and any disgrace to him is one to me. I don't like being disgraced, Chief. There doesn't appear to be anything I can do about it at the moment. But . . ." He stood up, and held out his hand, "I had to try. No hard feelings?"

"None on my part," Ironside said, and took the extended hand. "I'm sorry to—"

Fire burned his palm. Burned into it. He suppressed a wince, the impulse to jerk free from the iron grip of the other man. Instead, he shifted and tightened his own grasp, forcing Duke to share the pain which the latter had tried to inflict on him.

When they at last released each other, he glanced down at his palm in apparent surprise. "I hope I didn't burn you, Mr. Duke," he apologized. "Strange that I didn't feel it, but I must have been holding a lighted cigarette."

"Quite all right," Duke smiled at him handsomely. "I didn't feel anything either. Well,"—he turned to the district attorney—"shall we be going, Wayne?"

Billington arose, giving Ironside a bitterly tragic look. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to forget this, Bob. I'm afraid I'll always remember it."

"Good," Ironside said.

"We're all going to remember," Duke said. "I'll guarantee it."

"Would you like to shake hands on it?" Ironside said.

Duke's smile suddenly wiped out. He whirled and strode off toward the elevator, the DA tagging after him.

VI

• Mark Sanger didn't know how long he was out. But he came to with a uniformed cop helping him to his feet, then giving him a little shake by way of reviving him. The cop was also a Negro, a man he'd met through his job with Chief Ironside. They recognized each other at the same time, and the cop's professional suspicion gave way to concern.

"Mark—Mark Sanger! What the hell happened here, boy?"

Mark winced at the throbbing in his head. He pointed. "Him," he said. "That fella's what happened."

Chuck Glover was standing a few feet away, his face a bloody, unrecognizably swollen mess. He was being supported by another cop and an ambulance driver, and he was either out on his feet or doing a good job of faking it. He stood with his head sagged, body slumping. Questioned, he only mumbled in woozy incoherence.

Mark's cop friend again asked him what had happened. Mark said it just didn't make any sense.

"I was on my way to school up here, night school, you know. Just goin' along, mindin' my own business. An' that big clown hollered at me. Called me Rastus an' jig, an' a lot of other stuff."

"Oh," the cop said softly. "Oh, he did, huh? Just a minute,

Mark." He turned and called to the other two men. "What about Glover? How's he doin'?"

"Out on his feet," the other cop said. "Your friend really gave him a beating."

"He's faking," the ambulance driver said. "All he needs is a good kick in the pants."

He was a bespectacled young man, not actually small in stature but appearing so because of his narrow shoulders and bantam-cock mannerisms.

"I've seen his kind before," he said primly. "Big he-men while they've got things going their own way. But let 'em stop a few and they act like they're killed; too weak to whisper and all the rest of the route."

The cop shook his head. "Now, Smitty, he can't feel very good with a face like that."

"Well, I'll bet he was asking for it! All he needs is a good jolt in jail."

"Uh-huh. And maybe he'll get one. But you get him to a hospital right now. Have a doc check him over. If they say he can take it, we'll ride him to the can."

"If you say so," the ambulance driver shrugged. "How about giving me a hand?"

He and the cop loaded Glover into the ambulance. Mark was asked if he wanted to see a doctor, and he refused. A good bath and a good night's rest in Chief Bob's apartment, and he'd be just fine.

The ambulance driver nodded to him approvingly. Then, with a disgusted glance at Chuck Glover's recumbent body, he slammed the rear doors of his vehicle and drove off into the night.

The white cop came over to his Negro colleague. The latter nodded to Mark, and he went on with his story.

"Well, this Glover fella called me these mean names, like I said, an' I was just gonna let 'em pass. But then he said some things I just *couldn't* let go. That I was a dirty black son an' so on, an'—"

"For no reason at all?" The white cop frowned. "You were just hurrying down the street, and he started calling you dirty names?"

"That's it! That's what makes it so crazy! Couldn't really believe it was happenin' to me. But it *did* happen, so finally I came over to the car an' told him to step outside an' say

'em. An' then he all at once changes completely. Apologizes an' asks to shake hands, so I gave him my hand. An' then this girl, she wants to shake hands, too, so I give her my other hand. An'—"

"Girl? What girl?"

"The girl that was with him, man! Gal painted up like the side of a barn. So—"

"What happened to the girl? There wasn't any when we got here."

"She ran off. An' don't ask me what she looked like, 'cause I couldn't tell you. All that paint, I couldn't really see her face, an' she wore those real long gloves that go clean up to the armpit, an' she had kind of frowzy yellow hair that I figure must have been a wig. Anyway . . ."

Mark paused, looking at the two cops. Seeing the looks they were giving him. He reckoned he couldn't blame 'em much. Glover was an obviously wealthy young man, a reasonably handsome young man. A man who, within reason, could have had his pick of girls. But the one he had been with—allegedly—and who allegedly had run away was, according to Mark, *the one witness to her existence*, an outright freak.

"I'm telling you the truth," he said doggedly. "Just exactly what happened; how it was, the girl an' everything else. Didn't claim it made any sense. Fact is, I said right at the beginnin' that it didn't. That's just what I told you, ain't it, Al?"

"That's right," his friend nodded. "That's what he said, Ray. What were Glover and the girl doing here anyway, Mark? Just sitting here necking?"

"Been sideswiped, the fella said. Blew out the right front tire."

"*Sideswiped?*"—Ray, the white cop. "There isn't a mark on the car."

"I know, man! I can see that now. But—"

"And there's nothing wrong with the tire either. Pumped up and as good as new."

"I know that, too! I—I—" Mark waved his hands helplessly. "Let's go back to the beginnin'. Back to where they wanted to shake with me, an' they both got hold of my hands."

"You do that, Mark," his friend said encouragingly. And Mark did it.

It seemed to take him a very long time. Despite the cool San Francisco night, he was sweating when he finished. The two cops stared at him, then exchanged a long glance with each other. There was a seemingly endless silence, broken at last by a question from the Negro cop.

"That last part, Mark. Let's run through that again. He'd knocked you out, and when you came to he was about to kick you. Then you rolled away from him, jumped up and slugged him silly. The girl got scared and ran. There was just you and Glover together. There—that's right, isn't it? Nobody here but you and him, and you'd punched him to a pulp?"

"Well—well, yeah. That's right."

"There were only the two of you here, and he couldn't have punched his way out of a paper bag. But he suddenly knocked you cold! He hit you so hard that you were still out when we got here. Now maybe you'll tell us just how he managed to do that?"

"Well, I—I— Dammit, man!" Mark wailed. "I don't know! I—I—"

"Maybe it just didn't happen," Ray said softly. "Maybe you're popping the old bull at us."

"Wait a minute now! Just hold it a minute," Al said. "Are you sure you actually were slugged, Mark? That Glover slugged you, I mean?"

"What do you mean, am I sure? How do you think I got this knot on my head?"

"I mean, you could have slipped. Glover had already knocked you out once. You could have slipped or tripped and knocked yourself out, and simply jumped to the conclusion that Glover had done it."

Mark hesitated, his face clearing. "Well, yeah," he nodded slowly. "Reckon it could have been that way, all right. Didn't seem so at the time, but now that I think about it . . ."

Al turned to Ray. "Well? I'd say it added up, wouldn't you?"

"I'd say so. Maybe I wouldn't if anyone but Mark were concerned. But," he grinned engagingly, "as long as he's one of Ironside's men—"

The radio in the black and white patrol car began to chatter. Ray broke off with a nod, as he hurried to answer it. Al gave Mark a cigarette, held a match for him. Mark asked if he was free to leave.

"Stick around," his friend suggested. "We'll give you a lift back to the Chief's place."

"Well, now, that's mighty nice of you. But—"

"But we're not going to," Ray said flatly. "You're getting a ride in the other direction, Sanger."

"Huh?" They stared at him. "What do you . . ."

"Chuck Glover. He just died."

VII

• Chief Robert Ironside came out of the courtroom and into the corridor, bringing his chair to a stop at a point near the elevator. As his heavy scowl indicated, he was more than a little angry. At the same time, he tried to tell himself that his anger was unjustified.

After all, District Attorney Wayne Billington *did* possess discretionary powers, and he *was* very much a human being. So in view of those powers and his badly hurt feelings, he could hardly have acted in any way other than he had.

He was not obliged to accept Mark Sanger's unsubstantiated story as to how the fight started. If he chose to—and he did so choose—he was entirely free to believe that Mark had attacked Chuck Glover without provocation or justification, and literally beaten Glover to death. Such senseless attacks did happen. One read about them every day. And Mark had an unfortunate record as a juvenile delinquent.

Thus, and quite reasonably, Billington did not regard Chuck Glover's death as accidental. He did not regard it as justifiable homicide. He didn't regard it as second-degree manslaughter—or even first-degree.

No, sir! Not by a long shot. As much as it pained him—and he assured Ironside it pained him a great deal—he could see Glover's death as nothing less than second-degree mur-

der, and he demanded that bail be set at no less than twenty-five thousand dollars. And Judge Hotchkiss, also quite reasonably, had acceded to his demand.

Well—Ironside sighed and shook his head—it was no more than he should have expected. Wayne could probably have been a lot tougher if he had wished. At any rate, the bail was now being raised, and Mark would soon be at liberty pending his trial.

Ironside glanced at his watch, saw that some fifteen minutes had passed. Impatiently fumbling through his pockets, he discovered he was out of cigarettes. He hailed a passing deputy sheriff and borrowed one from him. Just as he was lighting it, the elevator door opened and Coleman Duke stepped out.

His handsomely tanned face underwent a swift change of expressions: scowl to poker face to brilliant, white-toothed smile. "Why, Chief Ironside! What a pleasant surprise!" He stood back, with a gesture toward the elevator. "May I help you?"

"Thanks. Waiting for a friend," Ironside grunted.

"A friend? I thought it might be an employec."

"He's both," Ironside said. "Not that it's any of your flamin' business."

"Mark Sanger, in other words. But he's my business all right, Chief. Everything about you is my business." Duke's eyes were cold steel. "And I wouldn't bother to wait for him, if I were you. He's staying in jail."

Ironside asked him if he'd like to bet on it. "Mark's gettin' out all right, and he's gettin' out pronto or my name's not Ironside."

"Then you've been using an alias all these years," Duke told him pleasantly. "Did you ever hear of a man named the Brown Bearcat? A prizefighter?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I asked you if you'd ever heard of a fighter named the Brown Bearcat."

Ironside studied the other's smile, and felt a faint stirring of unease. He hesitated, then shook his head curtly. "I never heard of him. So what?"

"This," said Duke, and paused with tantalizing deliberation. "Just this. I— By the way, you seem to be out of cigarettes. Won't you try one of mine?"

Ironside rudely took several, lighted one and glared at the shipping millionaire. "Well? What about this—this—"

"The Brown Bearcat. A preliminary boy, I believe you'd call him. Went several four-round matches when he was in his early teens." Duke smiled again, with terribly false understanding. "I don't blame you for not having heard of him. Very few people have. If I hadn't had certain resources and a great many contacts throughout the country—and if I hadn't been looking for something, just anything, you might say . . ."

"Dammit, man! Will you get on with it?"

"The Bearcat wasn't a great fighter, and he never would have been. Just a pretty good pork-and-beaner. But he was a professional fighter. Which means that legally his fists were and are considered deadly weapons. The same as a gun or a knife or—"

"Who the flamin' hell says no?" snarled Ironside. "Of course, his fists are deadly weapons. But what's that got to do with—with—" He broke off, his voice trailing away to a whisper. "Oh, no!" he groaned. "No!"

Coleman Duke nodded, grinning at him.

"Oh, yes, Chief Ironside. The Brown Bearcat's right name was—want to guess?—Mark Sanger."

VIII

• For a time, during Robert Ironside's boyhood, his father had been a very wealthy man. The wealth hadn't lasted long, the elder Ironside being fatally attracted to investments in perpetual-motion machines and being perpetually motivated to drawing to inside straights. But no matter; for a time, he had been rich. And during this time, he decided that his son should become a proper guardian of the wealth he would one day fall heir to; that he should learn the what and why of the expensive things money can buy, all the workings of their intricate and costly innards. For how else, unless he himself knew what he was doing, could he properly instruct his employees, and how else could he avoid being robbed blind by his employees, tradesmen and the like?

The family had owned three cars at the time: A Pierce-Arrow, a Cord and a twelve-cylinder Packard. In charge of these three vehicles were a chauffeur and a footman. Young Bob had been placed in the custody of these last two individuals, with the instructions that the trio of cars should be torn down piece by piece and then reassembled—with, of course, young Bob's doing his full share of the work.

The job took the better part of one summer. Mr. Ironside remained deaf to Bob's frequent attempts to beg off. *He* knew what was best, Mr. Ironside said. Practical experi-

ence was the only experience of value, and he was teaching his son a lesson he would never forget.

He was right—in a sense. Bob Ironside never did forget the lesson gathered during that long and arduous summer.

It was indelibly impressed on his mind that automobile mechanics lived generally wretched and lousy lives, and never again thereafter would he so much as change a tire if he could get out of it.

His distaste for things mechanical extended even to such simple things as can openers and electric toothbrushes. To get down to a case in point, he was particularly wary of the machinery which propelled his wheelchair—very expensive, electrically powered machinery, which could propel him forward and backward, to right or to left, by properly moving the small selector gear-lever in the chair-arm console.

True, he hated to have others do things for him that he could do for himself. But he detested the wheelchair's machinery more. And Mark Sanger had made it easy for him to do without it. Mark understood much more than people gave him credit for understanding, so he would even insist on pushing the chair, overriding Ironside's grumbling protests that the flamin' thing was motorized, dammit, so why not let the flamin' motor do the work? Mark would grumble right back at him, darkly declaring that he wasn't going to let no machine do him out of his job, even if his Chief did want it that way. So Ironside, outwardly dour but inwardly relieved, would give in to his Negro friend and co-worker. Mark would push the chair, and its machinery was generally unused.

But now there was no Mark. Mark was behind bars in the county jail, and apt to stay there indefinitely unless a miracle could be worked. So pastoral man, as represented by Chief Robert Ironside, was once again in the clutches of an industrialized society. Robert Ironside flamin' well had to use the flamin' power of his chair or be as flamin' useless as a teddy bear's tail.

So that being the way it was, why that was the way it was. Which didn't mean that he had to like it a flamin' bit! By way of expressing his dislike, he gave the selector gear an angry shove as the elevator door rolled open at the lobby level, and the chair responded by zipping him out into the corridor and almost slammed him against the opposite wall.

Bad architecture, he told himself, turning the chair down

the hall and again pressing the selector gear. Built the flamin' walls too close together.

He went down the hall in a series of fits and starts, veering this way and that like a ship without a rudder, as he savagely jerked and shoved the control lever. He located the ramp to the garage, shot down it with tobogganlike speed.

Two deputy sheriffs were walking up the ramp. They stared at Ironside, eyes popping, mouths dropping open in amazement. He snapped them out of it with a shout to get the flamin' hell out of the way, then sped between them as they leaped apart and hugged the walls. Their angry and profane shouts trailed after him as he continued his wild descent. Ironside replied with a raucous raspberry, then gently applied the brakes and rolled genteelly into the depths of the garage.

He maneuvered through it, purred smoothly outside onto the parking lot. Sergeant Ed Brown was waiting for him there, and came forward hurriedly at sight of his chief. As they moved toward the van, Ironside gave him the dope on Mark Sanger and Brown said something that sounded like *sun* and *itch*—but wasn't.

"The poor guy! How's he takin' it?"

"Better than I would," Ironside said, "if I was in his shoes. I left some money for him with the turnkey. Ought to be reasonably comfortable until we can spring him."

Brown shook his head worriedly. "You mean if we can spring him, don't you? With that prizefighting background, and such a goofy story about how the fight started—"

Ironside said the story wasn't goofy; it added up. "Glover and this tramp he was with were out for kicks. A Negro looked like a good chump to them—someone who presumably wouldn't complain to the police, or get much attention if he did."

"Well, maybe. But—"

"The chances are a hundred to one that this isn't the first time they pulled a mean stunt like this. I'd stake my job that there've been other victims. Which raises the question of what you've been doing all night and half the morning, besides taking life easy."

Ed said, Oh, sure, he'd been taking things real easy. All he'd been doing for the past sixteen-plus hours was putting the squeeze on his informers, and shaking down every flophouse and wine joint on skid row. All in the cause of find-

ing someone—some derelict or the like—who had had an experience similar to Mark Sanger's. And he had not found a single such person.

"You just haven't tried hard enough," Ironside said. "We'll have a bite to eat at my place, and you can start out again."

"How about some sleep?"

"Yeah," Ironside said. "How about that?"

They reached the van. Brown helped him inside, and they talked over the intercom as they rode toward Ironside's apartment.

"Let's say I turn up some characters that went through the same experience as Mark. That still doesn't take him off the deadly-weapons charge, does it?"

"Maybe not completely," Ironside admitted. "Not unless it can be proved that he believed his life was in danger. In that case, of course, he had the right to defend himself in any way open to him."

"Uh-huh. But if he can't prove it?"

"We'll have to see. At worst, it'll put a damper on the deadly-weapons charge even if it doesn't wipe it completely."

"Which it probably won't, with Coleman Duke throwing his weight around."

"Which it probably won't," Ironside agreed, "with Coleman Duke throwing his weight around."

It was nearly noon when they arrived at Ironside's apartment. The Chief decided that they should have breakfast rather than lunch, and began to busy himself with coffee, toast and scrambled eggs. In his preoccupation with preparing the meal, he did not immediately hear Ed moving about in the bathroom. When he did, he let out a bellow which brought the sergeant to him at a run.

Brown's face was lathered, and there was a razor in his hand. "For Pete's sake!" he panted. "What's the matter? What were you—"

Ironside said he figured Brown might be preparing to shave, and he was not to do so. "You'll do better on skid row if you look a little crummy yourself. Aside from that . . ." He hesitated. "Well, skip it. I'm getting another idea, but it's not clear in my own mind yet."

Ed washed the lather from his face.

He and Ironside ate breakfast. They were having a second

cup of coffee when the homicide chief glanced at the clock and let out a surprised grunt. "Eve! I wonder where the devil she is."

"Well," Ed shrugged. "She's been working night and day, Chief. Must have a year of overtime coming to her by now. And there was that wedding she went to last night."

"But she's bound to have heard about Mark by now! Why the blazes isn't she down here trying to help out?"

"But I just told you," Brown protested. "Anyway, this is her day off, isn't it?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"What's that got to—" Brown broke off with a helpless wave of his hands. "Did anyone ever tell you that you have many of the characteristics of Simon Legree?"

"Were you," Ironside said ominously, "about to tell me that?"

"Not me," Ed said hastily. "You cook a fine breakfast, Chief. Best eggs I ever ate."

"And you've eaten quite enough," Chief Ironside declared. "Gettin' so flamin' fat you won't be able to move around pretty soon."

"Huh? You mean I can't even finish my—"

"That's exactly what I mean," Ironside said. "Now, get out of here and go to work. And call back here every hour on the hour."

Sergeant Brown stared at him. Ironside met his gaze implacably, pointing a stern finger toward the elevator.

The sergeant groaned. He arose from the table, jamming his hat on his head. Ironside reached for the telephone, and began dialing Eve Whitfield's number.

IX

• The woman was deliciously pretty; pretty with the innocent loveliness of an older child. Yet she was no child by any means, as the merest look at her delectable matron's body would prove. Much of that body was exposed now as she lay sprawled on the bed, a hand thrown over her tear-stained face.

"It's just not true, Eve," she wept. "I k-know how it looks—what you must think of me—b-but—"

"There, there, dear." Eve patted her soothingly, a troubled look in her own lovely eyes. "Of course, it's not true. I believe you, and I'm going to help you."

"B-but how? How can you?"

"I'll think of something," Eve said.

"Honestly?" There was childish hope in the woman's voice, in the childish prettiness of her features. "You really will, Eve? You'll let me have the twenty-five thousand dollars to—"

Eve shook her head. She could not readily lay hands on twenty-five thousand dollars in cash any more than Belle could, and money was no answer to blackmail.

"But I'll manage something," she promised. "Now, to begin with, I'll have to see those—those, uh, objects again."

"Oh, *Eve!*" A self-pitying wail. "They're so *awful!*"

"I'm sorry. But if I'm going to help . . ."

Eve gave her another comforting pat, then arose and went to the dresser. She studied the message composed of pasted-up newsprint, reexamined the photograph which had been clipped to it. But her mind was not so much occupied with them, as the woman on the bed.

Belle Larabee. Mrs. John Larabee. Wife of a hard-working, highly respected and successful physician. John had figuratively hoisted himself up by his bootstraps to get where he was. A boy from a slum, a penniless, half-starved kid, he had fought his way upward and unassisted every heartbreaking step of the way. He deserved everything he had achieved. He deserved at least one thing far better than he had gotten. A better wife. A woman who did not misuse the accident of birth, which had combined a cute child's irresistible prettiness with a maddeningly lush body.

Still, Belle Larabee was a friend. An old school chum, at least. And she was the sister of the girl who had been married last night. Whatever hurt Belle would hurt that sister—a girl who was everything that Belle was not and should have been. Whatever hurt Belle would hurt John Larabee, who had already been disastrously cheated by marriage to her.

So Belle had to be helped. She had to be saved from this blackmailer. But just how to help, how to save her . . .

There was the tinkle of ice in a glass. The faint gurgling of liquid from a bottle. Eve glanced into the dresser mirror, saw Belle take a long, greedy sip from a glass of brandy and soda. She took another drink, and lighted a cigarette. As she inhaled, then exhaled a fragrant cloud of smoke, she saw Eve looking at her. And her child's face hardened with a flush of defiance.

"Well, what do you expect?" she demanded. "After all I've been through, I—" She broke off, biting her lip. "I'm sorry, Eve. But I'm just so shaky and n-nervous and—and—"

Eve went back to the bed, sat down next to her. She said quietly that she would have to ask some questions, and she would have to be answered truthfully.

"Truthfully!" Oh, so very indignant. As if an innocent child would lie! "Well, I certainly don't appreciate—"

"Answer me, Belle! Who was this man?"

"But—but there wasn't any, darling! The picture's a fake!

You know how they do these things. They take a picture of one person and superimpose it with another, and . . . and . . ." Belle Larabee's eyes fell. "I—I— It was just someone I met," she said, her voice the merest whisper. "I'd been bathing and I was kind of a mess, and he suggested that I go to his hotel and clean up a little, and—"

She swore she'd never seen the man before, and she'd never seen him again. But she knew he couldn't be the blackmailer. She'd gotten a little worried afterward, so she'd done some checking on him. And she knew he had as much or more to lose by exposure as she. An excellent position; a socially prominent and prudish wife.

"He'd be the last person in the world to pull anything rotten, Eve! I mean"—blushing—"anything like this. We'd been drinking, and it sounded like fun to see how we looked when we were—were . . ." Belle's voice trailed away again. "But there was just the one picture on self-developing film! Just one and he tore it up afterward and threw it away. So—"

"Maybe he just pretended to tear it up. Maybe he planned on having some more looks later!"

"Well . . . well, maybe. But still—"

"And then he may have lost it. Or showed it to a close friend who had a copy made."

"Oh, Eve! *Eve!*"

"Or perhaps he did tear it up, and throw the pieces in the wastebasket. Perhaps the maid or a bellboy found them, and—"

Belle broke into a wild sob, went into another fit of weeping. Eve simply waited until she had finished. Then she said there was only one sensible thing to do. To tell the truth to her husband and ask for his forgiveness.

The suggestion elicited another outburst of weeping. Again, Eve simply waited until it was over. Belle sniffled, gave her a half-resentful look.

"You promised to help me. You *promised!* And now all you do is tell me to do something that you know I can't!"

"Why can't you?"

"*Because*—that's why! I mean, anyway, how would that help Sis? If the blackmailer goes to her and Jerry—"

"It wouldn't be nice," Eve conceded. "But John is the important one. If he forgives you, I'm sure they will."

"But he won't forgive me! He's been acting so cold and funny lately as it is, that I can hardly go near him. He's just been simply awful ever since I—I—" She broke again, took another drink of the brandy. "Well, anyway," she said, "I can't go to John. And for Pete's sake, don't ask me why again! I've already told you, and—"

"I won't ask you why," Eve said. "I think I already know."

"What do you mean by that?"

Eve said that Belle knew what she meant. Belle angrily denied it. "If you're implying that—"

"I'm not implying. I'm stating. You've been involved with other men since your marriage, and John knows it. He probably found out about them himself, since you're not honest enough to have told him. Now, if he finds out about this last, uh, incident, after all your promises to behave yourself . . ."

Belle hesitated. In the long moment in which she studied Eve, the child's prettiness drained out of her face, subtly gave way to and conformed with the maturity of her body. And somehow a kind of wholeness came to her, and with it a wholesome attractiveness.

"Eve," she said quietly. "I can't help it, Eve. At least, I couldn't in the past. I think I could now, if I had a chance. If it wasn't for this picture. But if John ever sees that—even though it happened a long time ago . . . Well, you're right. He won't forgive it. He's already forgiven too much."

The phone rang. Belle answered it, said, "Oh, certainly; just a minute, please," and handed it to Eve.

Eve took it. Ironside's gruff voice came over the wire. She listened a moment, then cut in with a startled, "Oh, my gosh! That's terrible, Chief!" Ironside spoke again, less gruffly now. When he had finished, Eve could hardly find words to express her regrets and apologies. "No, of course I didn't know, Chief. I've been with a friend all night—she was very ill and needed someone—so I haven't seen a newspaper or listened to a broadcast, or . . . Yes, naturally. Certainly, I will. Just as quickly as I can get there!"

She hung up the phone, rose to her feet, spoke briskly to Belle. "I've got to leave now. Can't be helped. But getting back to your problem: I'm convinced the right thing to do is go to the police—"

"No! No, no, no! You promised, Eve!"

"It's really best, dear. They can handle it quietly, and—"

"No! You do it, Eve, and I'll kill myself! I swear I will!"

Eve sighed. "All right, then. It's best, but I won't do it. Now, this blackmailer—you're not sure whether he was a man or a woman? You couldn't tell from the voice?"

"No. It was kind of muffled. Like he or she might be talking through a handkerchief."

"Which," nodded Eve, "he or she probably was. The meeting time was tomorrow night, right? At eight o'clock?"

"That's right. At a bar. It must be a pretty terrible place, judging by the address."

"In that neighborhood, it would have to be," Eve agreed. She asked how Belle was supposed to recognize the black-mailer.

Belle Larabee shrugged. "He or she—oh, hell, let's call him he—will have a table in the rear of the place. A magazine will be lying open on the table, and a cigarette tray will be sitting on top of the magazine. I sit down, and the black-mailer comes to the table. After, apparently, he's had time to look me over and make sure I'm unaccompanied."

"But you won't know who he is until then?"

"No. What are you going to do, Eve?"

"Stand up," Eve said. "That's right, on your feet! Stand close to me, and draw yourself up to your full height."

Belle arose, puzzledly obeyed the order. Eve studied her out of the corner of her eyes, then drew her over to the mirror. Heads together, they stared into the mirror.

"Well," Eve said, "what do you think?"

"What do I . . ."

"Almost the same height, aren't we?"

"Well . . ."

"And about the same coloring. The same facial contours, generally speaking."

Belle nodded. "I suppose so, yes. But—oh," she said softly. "You'll pose as me. Go in my place."

"Now you've got it," Eve said briskly. "And now I've got to go. Take it easy and try not to worry."

She gathered up her purse, started toward the door. Belle followed her troubledly.

"But, Eve, you meet this blackmailer tomorrow night, and then what? What are you going to do?"

"The only thing I can do, since you won't let me call in the police."

"What's that—the only thing you can do?"

Eve told her succinctly. She was going to throw such a scare into the blackmailer that he (or she) would still be running in the year 2067.

X

• All day long, there was a moving circle of khaki-clad prisoners in the felony tank. Unbroken, unending. When one man wearied and dropped out, another took his place, and the circling went on. Even at mealtimes there was no pause, no break in its movement, the men sipping from tin cups of coffee or spooning into the tasteless mush, hash or beans as they walked. Always the circle continued its slow gyrations; yes, even at night when the tank was hidden in darkness. Or so, at least, it seemed. The substance was gone, yet somehow its shadow remained. The tired shadows of this day's circling, of this day's and every day's. Of this prison and every prison, everywhere and in every time, since man had first caged his fellow man.

Always and always. Forever and forever. Always and forever.—Hebrews 13:8.

Eternity is not, as Dostoevski imagined, a fly buzzing about a privy.

Eternity is prison, the endless shuffling and circling of men in Felony Tank. And this also is Hell—*this*, here and now, now and on earth; a place one does not have to dig for.

That's it, man. That's what it is. The ol' bullpen where they dehorn the studs, and they ain't no men no more.

A turnkey appeared in the corridor bordering on the tank, drew his heavy ring of keys along the bars in a teeth-edging clatter. The men slowed slightly in their circling, their eyes turning hopefully toward the chilled-steel curtain of their cage.

Mark Sanger's name was called. He dropped out of the circle. The barred door opened a few inches, and he slid out into the corridor. The turnkey motioned for him to precede him up the walkway.

It ended at a heavy door, inset with a two-way mirror and a funnellike mouthpiece. The turnkey spoke into the latter: "Sanger coming out." A moment or two passed, then the door opened quickly and the deputy sheriff on the other side took charge of Mark.

He was in the visitors' room now; a room within a room, formed by a long, rectangular wooden counter, from which a heavy mesh screen of wire extended upward to the ceiling. Mark blinked at the unaccustomed brightness of the room. The deputy spoke to him, pointing; gave him a firm little shove. Mark's eyes cleared, and at last he saw Eve Whitfield.

He hurried forward, a lump somehow coming into his throat. He sat down opposite her on one of the screwed-down benches, and she smiled at him through the heavy mesh.

"Mark," she said softly. "How are you, dear?"

"Gettin' along just fine, Miss Eve," Mark said. "Don't you worry about me at all!"

"And don't you worry either," Eve said stoutly. "I mean that. I know how hard it must be for you, but we'll have you out of here in no time, honey."

She gave him a firm little nod. The lump in Mark's throat grew larger and larger, and his heart swelled until he thought it would burst.

He hadn't felt that way about her at the beginning of their association. Then, or for some time afterward. In fact, he had been darkly suspicious of her; defensively resentful.

She-spook callin' him dear an' honey! Another oofay tryin' to patronize him! What'd she take him for, anyways? Just who she think she was—rich white girl, makin' with the sweet talk to a black-trash boy?

Then, gradually, almost suddenly, rather—he couldn't say just when it happened—his suspicion and resentment disappeared, and his attitude underwent a complete change. For, truth and goodness may be rare, but they are also stubborn; and, in time, they always prevail. A man may have been born with dung in his mouth, and his nose may have been rubbed in it until its stench becomes part of him. But it don't kill his sense of smell. And it don't kill his taste buds, man; it really don't. It just makes them sharper, you know? Hungrier for somethin' nice. And when it finally comes along, when he at last tastes honey and inhales the aroma of roses, he knows what they are. He *knows*.

He and Eve were different people. So why shouldn't they express themselves differently, show friendliness and liking differently? Where did it say that they had to do it the same way? Just where?

Nowhere, that was where!

Eve Whitfield talked just fine. Everything Eve Whitfield did was jus' fine. That was Mark Sanger's opinion, at least, and anyone with a contrary opinion had better not voice it around him. Not unless they wanted a clobbering!

They talked, now, and Mark repeated his description of the girl who had been with Chuck Glover. Eve listened, nodding and smiling encouragingly, giving no sign of the hopelessness which she felt in her heart.

The girl must have been disguised; masked with makeup, wig and arm-length gloves to conceal her normal appearance. What did she actually look like, then? A good question—but lacking an answer. And how could you find someone when you had no idea what she looked like? Ditto, ditto.

"Well," she told Mark brightly, "I've just started to look for her. The dime-a-dance halls and B-girl bars, and other places where a girl like that would be likely to hang out. I'm sure we'll turn her up soon."

"Yes, ma'am," Mark said. "'Course, if she didn't really look like that—just kinda masqueradin', you know."

"Oh, now, why would she have been doing that?" Eve laughed, dismissing the question. "Do you go to school the same way every night, Mark? The same route, I mean?"

"Shortest way," Mark nodded. "Reckon anyone that watched me for a while would know it—know just about where I'd be at what time. So if this Glover was aimin' to

set me up—" He hesitated, frowning. "But why would he want to do it, Miss Eve? Didn't know him. Sure hadn't ever done anythin' to hurt him."

Eve said that was something they would have to find out, and she declared, with an air of confidence, that they certainly would find it out.

"Now, you fought with Glover, and apparently knocked him out. Gave him such a punching, anyway, that he was helpless to harm you any further. But immediately after you turned your back on him."

"Yes, ma'am," Mark agreed unhappily. "He knocked me out. Couldn't do it, but he did. 'Course, it would have just seemed that way to me. Cop friend of mine thought maybe it did. Could be that I slipped and fell, an'—"

"Or it could be," Eve said, "that there was a third person in the car. In the trunk compartment, say."

"Yes, ma'am, could have been, I reckon. But why?"

Eve didn't know. She was still hesitating for an answer when the deputy sheriff called time on them.

Almost gratefully, Eve stood up and said good-bye.

"We'll work it out, dear," she promised. "You'll see. Just keep your chin up, and don't worry."

"Sure, Miss Eve," Mark said, somehow bringing a firm smile to his face. "Ain't worried a bit, and don't you be, either."

The deputy led him away. He turned and waved to her, as he was ushered through the heavy door to the jail, and Eve smiled and waved back to him.

Then, he was gone, and Eve drearily departed.

At five o'clock she returned to the police garage. Police Commissioner Dennis Randall was just stepping off the elevator as she arrived in front of it, and he was obviously a shaken man. He spoke to Eve, shaking his head and jerking his thumb upward in the direction of Ironside's apartment.

"It was just a suggestion," he explained forlornly. "No reason at all for him to blow up and threaten to hand in his resignation."

"Wasn't it?" Eve said. "Are you very sure of that?"

"Certainly I'm sure! What a question!" the commissioner said plaintively. "But people have to remember that I've got problems, too. The department has a certain image to maintain—and—"

"And you wanted him to announce Mark's suspension. To withdraw our support from Mark at the very time he needs us most."

"Well, uh, after all, Eve—"

"You hush!" Eve Whitfield said sternly. "You just hush, Mr. Commissioner Dennis Randall! And don't you ever speak to me again until you've washed your mouth out with soap!"

She turned her small, straight back to him, and stepped onto the elevator. Randall trudged off toward his car, muttering sourly about people who refused to understand his problems.

XI

• In the kitchen area of Robert Ironside's apartment, Eve and Sergeant Ed Brown sipped black coffee, speaking in whispers as their chief's booming voice drifted to them from the main room. He was talking on the telephone. After some difficulty, he had finally learned the identity of the Glover family lawyers. But their office was closed at this hour, and he was now trying to reach the senior member of the firm at his residence.

" . . . That's what I *did* say, dammit! Ironside! I-r-o-n-s-i-d-e, Ironside! An' don't give me any flamin' gags about the Merrimac, because I've already heard 'em all! . . . Well, all right, then. All right. Let's have a little action. . . ."

His voice dropped to an appeased murmur.

Ed and Eve smiled at each other, relaxing in unconscious empathy with their chief. Their identification with him was that close. By a kind of psychological osmosis his thoughts, his problems, his feelings became their own, their selves a transformed extension of his. Surface actions, surface appearances to the contrary, they were congruent parts of one another. The apparent as compared to the real was of as relatively little importance as is the revealed peak of an iceberg to the mighty, submerged mass to which it is attached.

In a sense, they *were* Bob Ironside. They were him and he was them. For such is the miracle of unwavering devotion, of perfect understanding.

Ironside finished his conversation. They heard him dial another number, then speak into the phone again. A couple of minutes passed, punctuated by the occasional and nearly inaudible murmur of his voice. Then he again hung up the phone and summoned them to him.

"Got hold of Glover's only surviving relative, an older sister," he explained, as they came into his presence. "Just flew in from Chicago, and she's out at the family mansion. She'll see us as soon as we can get there." He stroked his jaw, scowling. "Not that it'll do us a flamin' lot of good from what the lawyer told me."

Ed asked, "Why not, Chief?"

"Because she hasn't seen her brother in almost fifteen years, that's why. No contact with him at all, apparently. Hardly likely to know who his friends and associates were, or anything else about him, wouldn't you say?"

"I'd say," Ed nodded. "But how come the apartheid bit? Steering clear of the only relative she had?"

"Big family blowup. Her father seems to have favored Chuck; spoiled him rotten and cracked the whip over her at the same time. She finally got enough of it and walked out, and the old man cut her out of his will without a dime. Just before he died, he tried to get her to come back. Offered to reinstate her for a full half of his estate if she'd just come home and keep some kind of control over Chuck. Young Glover was getting completely out of hand, apparently, and his father couldn't do anything with him. But Nedra—that's the daughter—wasn't having any. She told her father that he could take his estate and Chuck along with it, and—uh— Well, never mind," Ironside said virtuously. "I wouldn't think of repeating such language. No point to it, anyway, since it would have been physically impossible for Miss Glover's father to do as she suggested."

He winked at them drolly. Ed and Eve laughed, the sergeant on a somewhat solemn note.

"Boy, she must have really hated her brother! Anyone who hates like that . . ."

"Is entirely capable of murder," Ironside agreed. "Providing, of course, that she had the opportunity."

"And then there's the estate. That's plenty of motive by

itself. Of course, she turned down a hefty split once, but—"We'll see," Ironside cut him off, then turned to Eve. "Ed didn't score today. How about you?"

"A water haul all the way," she confessed. "I did as you suggested; made a recheck with Mark just in case he'd been confused or overlooked anything when you talked to him. Then I took it from there, and—" She broke off with a sad little shake of her head. "No soap, Chief. Not enough to lather a gnat. The girl must have been disguised."

"Could be. You and Ed can try again tomorrow."

"After I get some sleep," Ed said firmly.

Ironside told him to stop whining or he'd put a bottle in his mouth. "One with a nipple on it, you should excuse the expression, Miss Whitfield. Now, while Sergeant Brown and I are conferring with Nedra Glover, here's a little job for you."

He tore a slip of paper from the telephone pad, and handed it to her: the name and address of an ambulance company, and the name of the proprietor.

"Their night driver, a man they call Smitty, is the one who picked up Chuck Glover. In other words, *he was the last person to see Chuck Glover alive*. By a rather strange coincidence, he is also the driver who picked up Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm's body. In both cases—still another coincidence—he arrived at the scene of the accident before the police."

Eve's brows went up. "That," she said, "is one heck of a lot of coincidences."

Ironside said that he wanted a full report on Smitty, and that the proprietor had promised to cooperate and to make no mention of it to the subject. "But don't hesitate to jolt him a little, if you feel it's necessary. Make him know he can get himself in one flamin' mess of trouble if he holds out on you or spills to Smitty. OK? Any questions?"

"Just one. Do you want me to report back to you to-night?"

"Morning's soon enough. No telling how late the sarge and I may be tied up with Miss Glover. Now—Ed, were you about to say something?"

"Well, I was just going to ask if—"

"The answer is No, you may not shave," Ironside said. "Now, let's all get going."

So Ed didn't, and they did; Eve headed for the ambulance company, while the homicide chief's van rolled away toward the Glover mansion.

The house was a rambling, three-story structure, of Moorish-Spanish design, as are many of California's very older residences. It sat on a hill, with grounds of approximately an acre and a so-called "widow's walk" atop its lofty roof, overlooking the distant bay.

The grounds were floodlighted tonight, revealing them as an overgrown tangle of weeds and uncut grass. They apparently would not, however, remain in this sorry condition very long. For late as it was, a full half-dozen Japanese gardeners were industriously at work on them, with scythes, hoes, rakes and electric mowers.

The van moved up the long, curving driveway and stopped beneath the fretworked *porte cochère*. Sergeant Brown lowered Ironside to the stoop, and the latter rolled up to the door, a very heavy door shaped to a triangle at the top. He was reaching for the knocker when it opened suddenly and Nedra Glover gave them a brisk, "Come in, come in."

She looked middle-aged, but she was one of those youthless women who seem to be born so looking. Her flat chest and apparently skin-and-bones body were prudishly covered with a long, black serge dress; and her skimpy hair was tightly drawn and fastened in a bun at the nape of her neck.

Here in the interior of the house there was even more activity than there had been outside. Wherever one looked, in the living room or into the rooms beyond, men and women in the coverall uniforms of a household cleaning company were busy with sweepers and mops and waxers and brooms. Tall ladders stood against the walls of the three-story living room, and toiling on them was a corps of wall washers. Still another group was employed on the long, curving stairway which led to the distant mezzanine above.

Nedra Glover gave the workers a grim nod of satisfaction, remarking that she had found the house a veritable pigpen. Which was appropriate enough, she added, since a pig had been living in it.

"Now that the pig is dead, and it has become the dwelling place of a lady—" She broke off, her sharp eyes catching their exchange of glances. "Well?" she asked. "Something wrong?"

"A matter of opinion," Ironside shrugged. "If you see nothing wrong in referring to your brother—your *dead* brother—as a pig . . ."

"I stand corrected," Miss Glover said promptly. "After all, what have pigs ever done to me?"

She led the way to a small elevator, and it carried them smoothly upward to the third floor. Ed Brown was the last to step off the car; glancing downward from the mezzanine to the parquet floor so far below him, he felt a queasy sense of dizziness. He jerked his eyes away from it, put his hand upon the balcony rail by way of steadying himself. Almost imperceptibly, the rail moved under his touch, and swayed outward ever so slightly.

Cold beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. For the rest of the distance to the small parlor-sitting room, he literally hugged the wall.

Miss Glover stood back from the door, allowing them to precede her into the room. Ed was uncomfortably aware of her scrutiny as he moved past her; a decidedly distasteful scrutiny. She closed the door, still looking at him, then stepped up within inches of him and peered up into his face.

"Young man," she said, "do you play a guitar?"

"Huh—I mean, what?" Ed stammered.

"Bongo drums?"

"Bong— Now, see here, Miss Glover—"

"Beatniks," Miss Glover said. "I simply can't stand 'em! I'm a registered nurse—what they call a 'visiting nurse,'" she explained to Ironside. "Have to go into a lot of bad neighborhoods. And every time I see some weirdie-beardie—"

Ironside cut in on her with a laugh. "Sergeant Brown's working on a case. He's unshaven by my orders."

"Funny," said Nedra Glover, with a disbelieving shake of her head. "I could have sworn he was a beatnik. Well, now that I've got everything off on the wrong foot, how about a drink?"

They declined on the grounds of being on duty. Miss Glover peremptorily overrode their refusal. They were her guests, she pointed out, fixing three tall ones. A polite guest did not infringe upon the prerogatives of his hostess by asking for refreshments before they were offered or refusing them when they were.

She thrust a glass into the hand of each man; shot a

shrewdly knowing look at Ed Brown as she took a swallow of her own drink.

"Well, young man, why don't you say it?"

"Say what?"

"That you're beginning to understand the bust-up between my family and me. That I'm enough to make a saint sore, let alone a definite nonsaint like my late brother, Chuck."

"All right," Ed said, "you read my mind."

"A very small job of reading," Nedra Glover said, "since it was content to arrive at conclusions with a minimal amount of facts. My mother died giving birth to Chuck. I was fifteen years old at the time, little more than a child myself. But my father made Chuck my full responsibility. He made me responsible for running the house, everything my mother had done. I had all the responsibility—and no authority whatsoever. Father wouldn't let me discipline Chuck. He babied him and spoiled him—believed all the vicious, filthy lies Chuck told him, and accused me of lying when I denied them. H-he . . . Papa blamed me for everything that went wrong, but he wouldn't let me do anything to make it right. And—and— Well, forget it!" Miss Glover said. "I've got no apologies to make. Any wrong that was done was done to me. And if I haven't made it clear how I felt about my brother, I'll do it now. I hated him. I'll always hate him. My only regret is that I couldn't have killed him myself!"

Silence settled over the room. A silence broken only by the distant sounds of the cleaning people. Ed Brown looked down into his glass, unwillingly touched by the woman's outburst, still smarting from her attitude toward him. She had rubbed him the wrong way, and people who rubbed the sergeant the wrong way were more than apt to get dosed with their own medicine.

"Just where were you," he said, at last, "at the time your brother was killed?"

"Where? Why, in Chicago, of course!"

"Were you? It's a two-hour flight from here to Chicago, and there are literally dozens of flights a day. Now . . ."

"Spare me," Miss Glover sighed, rolling her eyes heavenward. "Spare me your lurid imaginings. Chief Ironside, I understood that Chuck died of a severe beating. Is that correct or not?"

"So the autopsy shows," Ironside nodded. "Prizefighters

have died the same way. They take such a hard battering around the face and head that brain hemorrhage results."

"Could any woman have given him such a beating?"

"I don't see how, no."

"I didn't say she could," Brown said doggedly. "But she could have come along when he was helpless and finished him off. Judging by his appearance, it wouldn't have taken much of a blow."

"It didn't. *Pow!*" Miss Glover demonstrated. "I gave him a bopper to the chopper. Folded him up like a wet shirt."

Then she laughed coldly, arose and crossed the room to a small escritoire. While she busied herself there with pen and paper, Ed and his chief looked at one another. Ironside tapped his chest, then pointed to the sergeant. The latter nodded, instantly getting the message. He was to play along, follow the chief's lead.

Nedra Glover got up from the writing desk. Recrossing the room, she handed Brown a piece of paper.

"Those," she said, "are the names and Chicago phone numbers of three people I was with throughout the evening my brother was killed. One is a high-school principal, another is manager of my neighborhood bank, and the third is a supervisor at the social agency where I am—or rather, was—employed. We had an early dinner at my apartment, then played bridge until midnight."

Ed mumbled a seemingly embarrassed thanks for her cooperation. Miss Glover said fiddlesticks to his thanks. He was to go to the phone immediately, call the people in question, and confirm her story.

"Now!" She pointed to the phone. "Right this minute!"

"Here," Ironside chuckled easily, holding out his hand to Ed, "let me see that."

Ed handed him the slip of paper. Ironside studied it briefly, remarked that he saw no reason to question a lady's word.

"Tear it up and throw it away," he instructed. "And be neat for a change, will you? Try hitting the wastebasket."

Ed said, "Right!" And going to the wastebasket he sent a shower of infinitesimally shredded paper into it.

Ironside held out his glass to Miss Glover. "As long as you've got me started, ma'am . . ."

"I'll have one with you," she declared. "But none for your young assistant. He obviously can't hold his liquor."

"Sure, an' how often I've said the same thing meself,"

Ironside said earnestly. "'Tis a shrewd judge of character you are, Nedra Glover."

"Just call me Killer," Miss Glover said.

While she was at the bar, with her back turned, Ironside jerked his head at Brown, then nodded at the door. Again, the sergeant got his message immediately.

"See you outside," he said gruffly, and added a satiric word of thanks for Miss Glover. "Anytime I can do anything for you, just wave your broom."

"Oh, go blow some bubbles," she said, and he departed with an angry slam of the door.

She and Ironside had another drink. They had a third and a fourth—or at least she did. She apparently didn't notice that the Chief barely touched the last two drinks, that the glass he gave back to her for refills was practically full already.

While she was working on her fourth libation, she told him rather owlishly that he seemed to be her kind of people, and that any help he could she could give him was his for the asking. Ironside asked—and her brow puckered, thoughtfully.

"You kinda got me there, Chief. I hadn't seen Chuck in an age, of course, and he was too young to do much girl-chasing at the time I left. But I can tell you a couple of things."

"Yes?"

"He wouldn't have had any friends among his own class of people. The monied class, I mean; top crust, et cetera. They were all off of him almost before he'd cut his first teeth. So stinkin' mean, you know. Got all his pleasures negatively. The only talent he had was for hurting people—for lying and prying out those harmful little secrets which everyone has. The kind of thing that can really hurt, if it gets spread around. Why, uh . . . uh . . . Let's see. Where was I?"

"The girl," Ironside prompted. "The girl he was with the night he was killed."

"Oh, yeah. Well, like I say, I wouldn't have any idea who she'd be. Just no way I could, y'know. But—*hic*—I could tell you her type. The way Chucky was, she'd have to be a certain kind."

"Which is?"

"A tramp. A *dumb* tramp. Someone he could sort of

lead on, get her to believing that he was really sold on her. An' just about the time she thought she had him fooled . . .” Her voice trailed away, an absent look coming into her eyes. “I wonder,” she murmured. Then, “That must have been how it happened.”

Ironside waited attentively. Silently. Hardly breathing for fear of breaking her mood.

“Yes,” she nodded, as if to herself. “No one’s so low-down that no one cares about him. And a tramp would have trampy friends. Tough friends. At least one, anyway. And if the friend knew that Chuck intended to hurt her . . .”

Ironside waited again. Then he said very softly, “Your brother was afraid? He’d received some death threats?”

“You’re tootin’ well right he had! Yessiree! Started off with a blackmail note. And I reckon you know how much that bothered Brother Chuck. A big laugh, y’know? Actually tickled him. He was a skunk and proud of it, so how—how—”

The vacantness went out of her gaze and gave way abruptly to awareness, alarm. At practically the same instant, her eyes snapped shut and she let the glass slide from her hand.

Ironside spoke to her. He shook her gently. She made no response.

He started his wheelchair toward the door, then made a half turn in it and spoke to her again. Very, very clearly.

“‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much,’” he said.

There was still no answer, no movement from the woman in the chair. Ironside went on out the door, and headed carefully toward the elevator.

The cleaning people were gone, finished work for the night. In the vastness below him there was only silence, a yawning stillness which seemed to cry out for sound. A premonitory disquiet stirred within the chief’s rugged body—the body with its helpless, useless legs. Reluctantly, he felt his eyes drawn toward the frail balustrade, and the emptiness beyond.

How long a drop was it to the parquet floor? Sixty feet? Seventy? No matter. It was far enough. If someone should—

Something brushed against the back of his neck. Ironside gasped, made a backward grab with his left hand. Simul-

taneously, he triggered the console with his right hand, shooting the chair forward, then whipping it around.

There was no one there. Save for himself, the balcony was empty. The pounding of his heart slowed a little. He looked down at the mezzanine floor, at the runner of carpet stretching away into the shadows. He looked—and suddenly suppressed an abashed grunt.

A moth! A flamin' moth had practically tossed him into a tizzy!

"Losing my flamin' grip!" he told himself. "Better watch out or they'll have me back in three-cornered pants!"

He entered the elevator, and descended to the living room.

With a sudden spurt of speed, he shot out from under the balcony. He did not breathe easily until he had crossed the great room and reached the entrance door. Then, at last, he was outside, out in the cool night air where Sergeant Brown was waiting.

"Well?" Ed moved his chair onto the rear step of the van. "How'd you make out, Chief?"

"Not too badly," Ironside shrugged. "Going pretty good up until the time she passed out. Or appeared to pass out."

"Funny," Ed said, as he slowly elevated the step. "Funny that an old gal like that, one who's led the kind of life she's led, would hit the bottle."

Ironside said there was nothing strange about it at all. Nedra Glover had had to lead a very repressed existence. Now that she didn't have to, and a rigid decorum was no longer necessary, she was starting to swing.

"Ever look in on a convention?—a bunch of conservative businessmen away from home? Almost embarrasses you to watch 'em, doesn't it?"

"I see what you mean," Ed nodded. "Incidentally, about this list of names she gave me—the one I supposedly tore up . . ."

"Mmm, yes. About that, now. . . ." The Chief rolled inside the van and locked the wheels of his chair. "A bank manager, a high-school principal and a social-agency supervisor. Three of a kind, Nedra Glover's kind. All part of the repressed society."

"So?"

"So when you get to Chicago, check in with Captain

Nicholson. He'll see that you get full cooperation from the PD there."

"Right," Ed said, and closed the doors of the van.

Ironside grinned to himself. Raising his wristwatch, he began to count off the seconds. At the count of five, the doors suddenly reopened and Sergeant Brown glared in at him.

"*Chicago!* Did you say when I got to—"

"Chicago. How else are you going to check on those three—watch their reactions?"

"B-but, dammit! You mean, I go right now?"

"Why, of course not," Ironside said. "Not until after you've driven me home. As for—"

"I know, I know," Ed sighed. "I can sleep on the plane. A whole two hours. Four hours coming and going."

"Uninterrupted," Ironside said, "by any time out for shaving."

XII

• Eve Whitfield entered the ambulance-company garage, and glanced around its dimly lighted interior. A couple of white-jacketed drivers were lounging against one of the ambulances, drinking coffee from paper cups while they engaged in an earnest, low-voiced conversation. Nearby a mechanic was bent under the upraised hood of another of the gray-painted vehicles, alternately accelerating its motor, then making minute adjustments on the carburetor with a long-shafted screwdriver. A shortwave radio chattered from somewhere in the rafters overhead, monotonously reciting police calls.

Eve started toward the mechanic, concentrating on the business at hand. Aware of the radio, without actually listening to it. The words and the sudden quickening of the voice not registering on her. Then . . .

There was an abrupt glare of headlights. Blinding; freezing her in her tracks. A siren sounded deafeningly; a powerful motor roared and raced. It bore down on her, the ambulance. Coming up from the rear of the garage, gathering speed by the split second. A howling, glaring, three-ton monster which would obviously knock her into the middle of next week.

She never knew how she managed to get out of the way.

Quite likely, the action was involuntary; she toppled rather than jumped. The mechanic caught her by the elbow, grinning sympathetically through rotted teeth.

"Them boys really move, huh? Really get up an' travel."

"I'll say," Eve breathed. "Why, I thought that—that—"

"Uh-huh," the mechanic chuckled. "An' that there Smitty just might do it. Smitty, he just ain't got much patience with people. Quick on the trigger as he is with his wagon."

Eve said fervently that she believed him, and the mechanic said, Aw, 'course he didn't really mean it. Smitty wouldn't ack-shully run over no one on purpose.

"Awful nice little fella, when you get to know him. A scrapper an' kind of touchy, but plenty nice, too. Just don't do nothin' to get him down on you, an' he won't do nothin' to you."

He directed her to the manager's office, a partitioned-off enclosure at the rear of the garage. A rather paunchy individual, the manager wore a derby hat and a checked vest, its many stains and soiled spots defiantly undimmed by any touch of the cleaner's hand. Mr. Lackey (for that was his name) seemed also to have successfully abstained from any cleaning of his person—or at least the portion of it that was on view through the gape of his casually buttoned shirt. Eve looked pointedly at the area, commented on the gape, and suggested an excellent reason for closing it.

Lackey blinked, grinning expectantly. "My, uh—my um—what's showin'?"

"Your umbilicus. Your navel, in other words. It's not exactly a pleasant sight."

"My navel?" An exaggerated pretense of ignorance. "My belly button, y'mean? Did you say my belly button was showin'?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," Eve said sweetly. "What I said was that I wanted to be present the next time your common-carrier's license came up for renewal."

The manager's manner underwent a miraculous change. Rapidly repairing his disarray, he became obsequious to the point of servility, earnestly assuring Eve that whatever she wanted of him was hers for the asking.

"You want Smitty fired, just say so. I'll call him in right now, an'—"

"Take it easy," Eve said. "All I want is some information.

"First, how long has this Smitty worked for you, and what's his full name?"

Lackey replied that Smitty had been in his employ for something more than a year, and that his full name was kinda funny. "Jones Brown Smith. Three last names, instead a like most people. Took some kiddin' about it when he first come here, until he hauled off an' smacked a guy."

The manager went on to reveal that Jones Brown Smith was very quick at smacking people who gave him trouble. Seemed to be about half sore when he showed up for work, and it didn't take a lot to set him off. "I reckon that's why he wears gloves all the time. So he won't hurt his hands when he lets someone have it."

Despite Smitty's proclivity for smacking people, Mr. Lackey proclaimed him a man of many virtues, chief among which were industriousness and absolute honesty.

"Y'know how it is in this town, lady. Whichever meat wagon makes it to the scene of an accident first is the one that gets the job. An' it just don't hardly ever happen that anyone beats Smitty. I reckon that's partly because he cruises most of the night—just rides around with his radio goin' an' waits for somethin' to break. So if he's in a neighborhood where somethin' *does* break, an' Smitty's awful lucky that way . . ."

Eve said dryly that she'd noticed his luckiness, and the manager promptly registered horror.

"Lady, what are you sayin'? What are you tryin' to do to me?" He extended his hands in a pushing motion. "No, don't say it! Don't even hint it! You drop a few hints like that around, an' I'm out of business. Besides which it ain't fair to one of the honestest little guys in the world!"

"Meaning Smitty?"

"Who else? Now there's a lot of accidents in this town that don't get reported to the police. Not at the time they happen, anyways. The average driver runs into one of 'em, it's just too bad for the company. He collects cash for the trip to the hospital, an' the company don't never see a dime of it. But, Smitty—uh-uh! No-siree! He could have knocked down maybe a thousand dollars since he's been here, but he's checked in every penny of it. Now don't that prove somethin' or don't that prove somethin'?"

"It proves somethin'," Eve said. "But it doesn't disprove somethin' else."

"Like which?"

"Like maybe," Eve said, "like maybe Smitty has someone in his ambulance who gives him some trouble, and this Smitty, he just don't take nothing off of nobody, so he gives the party a smacking. And he smacks him so hard that—"

"Lady!" Mr. Lackey groaned. "Oh, *lady!*"

"It couldn't happen?"

"How am I gonna answer somethin' like that? How am I gonna prove it to you? Why don't you ask me if I'm still beatin' my wife?"

"Are you?" Eve said.

The manager met her cynical gaze for the merest of moments, then removed his derby and made a dignified examination of the interior. That, he declared, was a personal matter; and anyways a fair fight was a fair fight.

"An' it don't have nothin' to do with Smitty, neither. Why—why—" He broke off, his face clearing; continued on a conspiratorial note. "You know somethin'? I figure he ain't like he seems to be at all; I mean, quick with the mitts an' so on. It's just a cover-up, see? He's really kind of a panty-waist."

"Yes?"

"I'm tellin' you! Now, you got to look real close to see it, an' even then you can't always. He don't always wear it, an' he's real good at puttin' it on. Better'n most women. But . . ."

His voice a bare whisper, he concluded his revelation, giving Eve a lewd wink by way of emphasis.

"I swear it, lady. The guy wears makeup, like a girl, y'know. Powder an' paint an' stuff. Now what do you think of that, huh? What d'you think of that?"

Eve didn't know quite what to think of it. But she thought it important enough to report to Ironside that night. Leaving the ambulance-company garage, she discovered something else which seemed to demand reporting immediately: She was being followed.

The vehicle wouldn't come in close enough to let her get a look at it. She made several quick stops, doubled back a time or two. But the other driver was an expert, seeming to anticipate her moves before she made them, and he always managed to stay out of identification range. So she could only be sure that he was following her—without learning who he was or what kind of vehicle he was driving.

Ironside hadn't returned to his apartment when she arrived. Wearily, she stretched out on the lounge to wait for him, deciding to close her eyes for a moment. The next thing she knew, his hand was gently shaking her awake, an incredibly tender smile on his face as he looked down at her.

The tenderness, the smile, vanished the moment she opened her eyes; gave way to a defensively exaggerated scowl. Gruffly, he asked her if she thought he was running a flamin' flophouse, and suggested that she wake up and pay for her bed.

XIII

• Someone had also tailed him and Sergeant Brown that night, and he had a flamin' good idea of who it was. Either a private investigator, or an industrial cop—which added up to the same thing as far as they were concerned.

Coleman Duke. Coleman "I've-got-a-long-memory" Duke. He'd swung his might and his millions against Mark Sanger, and landed right on target. He intended to go right on swinging against Ironside & Co., trying to find a vulnerable spot. Looking for something—anything—to compensate for the disgrace which had been garnered by his misbegotten son.

"And there's nothing we can do about it," Ironside said, "unless his people step out of line. We simply go on about our business, and be very, very sure that we don't step out of line ourselves. Now about this Smitty—Jones Brown Smith . . ."

Smitty would bear investigation. A lot of it. But first things first, and their prime problem at the moment was locating the girl who had been with Chuck Glover on the night of his death.

"Been doing a lot of thinking about her," Ironside went on. "Been thinkin' that Mark may have given us a bum steer

on her. Not meaning to, of course. I'm sure he described her exactly as he saw her. But Mark's a very young man, and he wouldn't be human if he weren't prejudiced against her. I've got an idea that she'll turn out to be very far from a freak when we find her."

"When," Eve sighed. "Chief, wouldn't we stand a much better chance if we put out an all-points on her, and tipped off the news media? I know you thought it was best to play this one close, but—"

"It's the only way to play it," Ironside said firmly. "If she finds out she's wanted, she'll bury herself so deep we'll never dig her up. But let's get back to first-firsts—take it from the top. Judging by the way they talked and acted, Glover was fairly well acquainted with the girl. Which means she wasn't the laughable freak Mark thinks he saw, because Glover simply wouldn't have been acquainted with such a creature. In actuality, she's probably quite an attractive girl. Tends to overdress and use too much makeup, but that hardly makes her unique."

"I wish it did. Assuming that she worked for a living, to use the word loosely."

"Oh, she did. This Chuck Glover appears to have been a very shrewd character, in a hideous kind of way. Anyone who hoped to dig him for a living was in the wrong garden patch."

"And she'd work in a taxi-dance hall or B-girl bar, or some such establishment? A place where the pay was good, and low standards were an asset rather than a liability?"

"Presumably. She hardly fits the pattern as a salesgirl or secretary or factory employee."

"Well, then? We've got an unusual-looking girl, but not exceptionally unusual. An overdressed, overmade-up tramp. Do you know how many thousand of girls there are like that in this town?"

"Quite some," Ironside shrugged. "But they don't all work. They aren't all attractive."

"But do you have any idea how many thousands of B-girl bars and dance halls and—"

"I don't even care. I know there aren't thousands of taxi-cab companies."

"What?"

"A car would just be a nuisance to such a girl. It could

make her miss out on a lucrative after-hours' date, and the getup she'd wear on the job wouldn't be suitable for driving."

"Yes, but—but—"

"Well? You'd hardly expect her to ride buses and street-cars, would you?" Ironside spread his hands. "Taxis are the answer, Miss Whitfield, QED."

"The name is DOPE," Eve sighed. "Now, why didn't I think of that?"

"You didn't have to," Ironside said smugly. "You've got a smart boss."

"Who said no? I'll get on it the first thing in the morning, Chief."

"You'll stay in bed in the morning," Ironside said, "and the rest of the day, too. Get yourself rested up. No good to me, anyway," he added gruffly. "Too many rocks in your head. But I like to keep you around for decoration, and I figure you won't look pretty if you drop dead from exhaustion."

Eve laughed. "Now, Chief, with Mark and Ed both gone, who—"

"Who needs 'em? I'll just call the cab company dispatchers and let them do the work, and I can get a driver from the police pool. Anyway, Ed will be back from Chicago on one of the afternoon flights."

Eve demurred about taking the day off, but not too strongly. Out of a sense of duty rather than desire. She needed a good rest. Needed it particularly with Belle Larabee's blackmailer to face.

"Well," she said, rising from the lounge, "if you're absolutely sure . . ."

"Absolutely sure," scoffed the Chief. "How redundant can you get? Next think you'll be sayin' is 'absolutely wonderful' and 'absolutely perfect.'"

"Now I may do just that," Eve said. "I may say them about a certain pussycat I know who tries to act like a grizzly bear."

"What?" snarled Ironside. "What's that, woman?"

"I might . . ." Eve took a mischievous step toward him.

" . . . I might even give him a good-night kiss."

"Out!" Ironside shouted, pointing sternly toward the elevator. "Beat it! Get! Go crawl back under your rock."

Eve laughed, and left.

Ironside sat looking after her for a moment, then turned off the lights and wheeled himself into the bedroom. He undressed laboriously; awkwardly hoisted himself into bed. The simple tasks, routine for a normal person, all but exhausted him. Left him as drained-dry physically as Eve's playfulness had drained him emotionally. Yet the first condition was a kind of reassurance for him, poor comfort though it was. It underscored his conviction that his reaction to the temptation which she presented in general, and tonight in particular, was the only one possible for him. The only way a man who was decent and honest with himself could act.

She didn't know. No one knew. No one but Robert Ironside knew the actual dimensions of his handicap. And there was only one way another person could know. To let her—them—share the burden. To let them accept it blindly, with no true concept of its terrible weight; deliberately luring them into a trap with no exit, where an accident of fate had placed him.

You did that to someone you liked? Loved? You did *that* to them?

"Not by a damned sight, you didn't!" Ironside told the darkness. "Didn't need anyone, anyway; getting along just fine. Flamin' head is bloody but unbowed."

And . . .

Things could change, couldn't they? Wasn't change the only constant factor in a world of variables?

A man was hurt, and a man was healed. Doctors were right, and doctors were wrong. What came down could also go up.

"To each thing there is a season, and a time for everything under the heavens."

There you were, right out of the Bible. There you were—the history of the world in one sentence. An explanation and an apology. A prayer and a promise. And hope.

Hope. . . .

Chief Ironside closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

XIV

• "Oh, yeah, sure," said the proprietor of the Lullaby Bar & Grille. ("Twenty beautiful hostesses.") "You mean Carol LeMoyné. Yeah, Carol worked here; real ladylike broad, too. Never figured her for a frammis with the fuzz, but I guess that's the way the whiskey sours, ain't it?"

"This isn't a pinch," Ironside explained. "Right now, I'd just like some information about her. Whether she's still employed here, to begin with."

"Guess that's for her to know, an' me to find out," the proprietor shrugged. "I mean, these broads, they come an' they go. They don't punch any time clock, an' we don't ask any questions. They want to work, they show. They don't, they don't."

"When was the last night she worked? The last night you saw her?"

"That's two different questions, Chief. She didn't work the night before last, but she was in here. Came in early with—" He broke off, eyes widening. "Hey, she didn't have anything to do with that, did she? The Glover killing? I thought they were holding a—"

"They are," Ironside said, "and there's no evidence against her. She was in here with Glover?"

"Uh-huh. Kind of a celebration. She an' Glover were

gonna get engaged, an' everyone was buying drinks for everyone else. An' . . ." The proprietor paused again, shaking his head. "I suppose that's why she's laying off, poor kid. Probably mournin' him. Don't have no idea, I reckon, that she ain't lost a thing."

"Yes?"

"I could read him like a book—the kind that makes you wish you didn't know how to read. He was kidding her, stringing her along. Leading her up to the mountaintop, so's she'd have a long ways to fall. Why, Chief, that character didn't have no more idea of gettin' engaged to her than he did to me!"

Ironside suggested that perhaps Carol hadn't been deceived. She'd realized she was being kidded, and done some kidding of her own. The proprietor glanced at him shrewdly.

"You know how much I got tied up in this joint, Chief? Liquor and cabaret licenses, not to mention stock an' fixtures? Well, it's a pile. A big pile. Put it in dollar bills an' you'd need a barn to stack it in."

"So?"

"So a few words from the fuzz, an' there's a padlock on the door an' a notice of suspension from the liquor-control board. So I don't kid the fuzz; I don't do anything to get 'em down on me. I don't risk that pile for some broad that I never seen until three months ago."

Ironside grinned, then laughed. "All right," he said. "I wasn't kidding you when I said we had no evidence against Carol LeMoyne, but I was fishing for some. However, if you say she'd swallowed Glover's line—"

"—you can believe me. I could read her like I could read him. He'd sold her a package, and she was happy as all hell to buy it."

"How long were they here?"

"Half hour, maybe forty minutes. Long enough to buy a couple drinks an' have some bought for 'em."

"Were they friends—the people who bought for them, I mean?"

The proprietor said maybe, but he didn't figure so. And there was just no way of knowing. He and the Chief could count the grains of sand in the Sahara—with their eyes closed yet!—quicker than they could find out. His gross was around fifty thousand a week, 90 percent of it booze.

Break that down into drinks and try to say who had bought what and when, and you'd be as screwy as his customers.

"Not that I don't run a straight joint," he added quickly. "It's just the way the gin slings. I got to make money. The broads got to make it. An' the studs that come in here expect to get made. It ain't a friendship place, y'know. The broads hustle the studs, an' the studs start pourin' 'em down. They get a few under their belts, an' everyone's their friend, an' they're buyin' for everyone to prove it."

Ironside smiled, nodded encouragingly. Maintained a plausible pretense of listening as the man continued his amiable chatter.

Chuck Glover's life had been threatened, or so his sister had indicated. Perhaps the threat had been carried out here, via a slow poison in a drink from an anonymous buyer. That would explain a confusing contradiction in Mark Sanger's story—how Glover had managed to slug him when the young millionaire was out on his feet himself. Hit suddenly by the poison, his big body could have toppled forward, knocking Mark to the pavement.

Of course, there was one big hole in the theory. According to the postmortem, Chuck Glover had died of a brain hemorrhage resulting from a beating administered by Mark. But . . .

". . . And that," the proprietor said solemnly, "is how me an' the old lady get to Europe twice a year. The snakes that these studs see are really for real, y'know, so the broads milk 'em for serum an' we peddle it to the Pasteur Institute. An'—"

Ironside laughed, cutting him off. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid my mind was wandering for a moment."

"You better brand it an' put a bell on it," the other grinned. "Wandered much further, it might have got lost."

"That," Ironside said, "is the most valuable suggestion submitted this week. The prize is a double of anything you name."

"Never touch the stuff, Chief. How about havin' one on me?"

Ironside shook his head, starting to turn his chair toward the door. "Thanks, but no thanks. After all, you could be a suspect."

"Me?" The proprietor blinked at him, aghast. "*Me?*"

"Why not? You liked Carol, you didn't like Glover, and

who bought him drinks nobody knows. Motive, means and opportunity. Like us fuzz always say, what more do you need?"

"Aw, now, Chief. . . ."

Ironside nodded serenely. "That's how the Scotch mists," he said.

XV

• Carol LeMoyne's address was that of a duplex apartment in a neighborhood which might best be termed so-so, wavering somewhere between fair and good-minus. For RENT signs were frequent, one of them indicating that the other apartment in Miss LeMoyne's building was untenanted. Moreover, judging by its rusted screens and dust-streaked windows, it had apparently been unoccupied for a very long time.

A maid answered Ironside's ring. A pretty young Negro girl with a very light complexion and a pronounced Southern drawl. She announced that Miss LeMoyne wasn't home; that she had seen nothing of her since the evening of the day before yesterday, when she had gone home after completing her day's duties.

"Thass the lass time I saw her, Chief, suh. Reckon it musta been aroun' six o'clock in the evenin'. Came back the next mawnin' she wasn' heah, an' ain't heah today. Ain't slept in her bed none neither."

"I see," Ironside said. "Are any of her things missing?"

"Things, suh?"

"A suitcase. Clothes. Anything to indicate she'd gone on a trip."

"Jus' no way of knowin', suh." The maid shrugged help-

lessly. "Nevah done no foolin' aroun' in her room. Miz' Carol, she wuk at night'n sleep in the daytime, an' she don' want no one disturbin' her."

"Did you know a Mr. Glover? I believe he came here several times to see Miss LeMoyne."

"Didn' know none of Miz' Carol's frens, suh. Reckon they come heah, they do it after I leave at night."

Ironside nodded; that was reasonable. He asked if Miss LeMoyne had absented herself from home before for any prolonged length of time. The maid seemed to pounce on the question—to eagerly assent to it.

"Come t' think of it, she sure did, suh. Done it a coupla times. Bet she off tomcattin' aroun' somewhere, don' you?"

She laughed with senseless good humor. An obsequiously ingratiating laugh. Ironside asked her if she intended to stay on until Miss LeMoyne returned, or to seek other employment. Again there was an eager pouncing on his question, a puzzling too-readiness to answer.

"Be stayin' till the fust of the month, anyways, suh. Got my wages paid that long. Reckon I jus' hafta wait and see after that."

"Mmm, yes," the Chief said vaguely. "Where do you live, anyway? How can I get in touch with you?"

"Uh—what, suh? What you say, Chief?"

"I said, where—"

"Oh, yes, suh," the maid broke in eagerly. "I unnerstan' now, suh. Well, I jus' stay heah while Miz' Carol away. Jus' move myself right on in. That way I don' miss her, case she come back."

"I see," Ironside said slowly, and wondered why he was troubled by her response.

It was sensible. Reasonable. And having her here could be a help to him.

"Here's my card," he said. "If and when Miss LeMoyne returns, I'd like you to call me immediately. And don't—"

"Yes, suh, an' I don' tell her nothin' about it. Don' even mention the p'lice been heah. I jus' call you jus' as fast as I can."

"That's right," Ironside said, frowning unconsciously, "and also call me if you decide to leave."

"Yes, suh. I sure do that, Chief, suh. You trus' me, suh, I do jus' that."

Ironside hesitated; nodded. That seemed to wrap it up.

There was nothing more to ask, no more answers to be elicited. He'd half expected Carol LeMoyne to take it on the lam, so that checked out, too. Everything was as it should be, all circumstances considered. But, still . . . still there was something damnably wrong!

No, it wasn't the fact that Miss LeMoyne had a maid. She could afford one on her earnings as a "hostess," and a maid would be a big convenience to someone working at night. What was wrong was something about the maid herself. But just what it was . . .

She misread his hesitation. With anxious obsequiousness, she unlatched the screen, held it open for him.

"I tell you the truth, suh. You don' believe Miz' Carol gone, you come right in an' look for her."

"What?" Ironside was startled. "Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"Thass all right, suh. Know how it is with white folks. Always figuhs us colored is liars'n sticky-fingered an' everything." She laughed with senseless merriment again. "Yes, suh, thass the way they figuh. Can't really blame 'em none neither, I guess."

"Can't you?" Ironside said. "Why not?"

"Well, you know, suh. You—"

Ironside said he didn't know any such of a flamin' thing; he had a good friend and a trusted assistant who was a Negro. Then he raced his chair inside, whirled it around facing her.

Her lovely face was a mask of mixed emotions. Fear, servility, sullenness. She gestured a weak invitation, smile-grimaced at him.

"You jus' go right ahead an' look, suh. You see Miz' Carol ain' here."

"Yes, she is," Ironside said. "She's just hard to recognize without her wig and her arm-length gloves, and her heavy makeup."

XVI

• Her name actually was Carol LeMoyne; that was one genuine thing about her. Another was her tears—her shame and her sorrow. Ironside looked at her pitilessly (or a very good facsimile thereof). Wrongdoers—the pretty young female types, at least—were invariably tearful, and ashamed and voluble with regrets. *After* they were caught!

Scowling, he asked her what the blazes she had intended to do if things had gone as she hoped they would. "Well? You're not completely stupid, are you? Did you think you could marry Glover without his finding out you were a Negro?"

Carol sniffled; shook her head helplessly. "I—I'm not s-sure I even thought about it, sir. I tried not to. Or if I did, I—I—" She burst into tears again. "Oh, I'm so sorry, s-so, so sorry!"

"Knock it off!" Ironside snarled. "Lay off the sob act, and answer my question!"

"I—I— W-well, I guess I thought that, when he saw how t-truly nice I was—and I am nice! I'm just as n-nice as any white girl, and—and—"

"Nice, huh? You've got a flamin' funny way of showing it!"

"I k-know. B-but—" She bit her lip, raised liquid-brown

eyes to his. "You just don't know how it is, sir. You don't know what it's like to be a Negro!"

"And you don't know what it's like to be white, and no one knows what it's like to be someone else. Crazy girl!" Ironside fumed. "Be tellin' me next that a jaybird doesn't know what it's like to be a sparrow, an' a dog doesn't know what it's like to be a cat. What the blazes has that got to do with anything?"

Carol smiled unwillingly; almost giggled at the outburst. Ironside attempted a fierce glower—and almost succeeded at it.

"All right," he said gruffly. "As a Negro you had problems. Finding a decent place to live and getting a good job, and doing the things you wanted and were entitled to do. Got a few problems of my own, y'know. Always going to have problems as long as there are stupid and hateful people in the world. But such cure as there is doesn't lie in being stupid and hateful yourself."

The girl murmured that she knew that. She hated to think what the Sisters would say if they knew what she had done. She was an orphan, raised in a convent. And everything had been so different there. Everyone was treated like everyone else. And then it had come time to leave, and emerging into the outside world, a world of prejudice and viciousness . . .

"But that doesn't excuse me." She raised her head firmly. "I was worse than Chuck, even. I tried to outdo him, act meaner and more bigoted, to make him like me. And all the time he was laughing at me. He knew the truth all the time."

"How do you feel about Glover now?"

"I'm glad. Not glad he's dead, of course. I wouldn't wish anyone dead. Just glad it's over, that there was never really anything between us. When I think of the terrible things I did . . ."

She had often seen Mark Sanger going to school when she taxied to work at night. So it was she, in her anxiety to please Chuck Glover, who had suggested that they park and wait for Mark. That they trap him into a beating.

"Oh, *Chief!*" she wailed suddenly, tears flooding her eyes again. "How *could* I? How could I ever have—have—"

"Knock it off!" Ironside snapped. "Get up and come over here?"

"S-sir?"

"You heard me! Come here, that's right. Now, back up close to me."

Wonderingly, Carol LeMoyné obeyed the command. Backed up close to his chair, Ironside drew back his hand and gave her a resounding smack on the bottom.

She let out a yelp, a pained, "Ouch!"

"Now," Ironside growled, "you've been punished. Did a bad thing, and you've been punished for it. So just knock off that nutty bawling an' boo-hooing!"

Her reaction was not the one he expected. Her lovely face abruptly crumpled, and she went down on her knees at the side of his chair. Head buried against his chest, clinging to him as a child might have, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Ironside was dreadfully embarrassed. He had never been so embarrassed in his life. Rather weakly, he told her to knock it off, dammit; to stop acting like a flamin' nut. Voice faltering, he asked her just who she thought he was, anyway; just what the blazes did she think she was doin', anyway. And then as the small arms tightened around him, the small head burrowed deeper into his chest. . . .

Something had gotten into his flamin' eyes. He raised a hand and brushed it away (Whatever had gotten into his flamin' eyes?) and the hand came down gently upon the mass of soft, dark hair. And he patted it comfortingly, patted it and stroked it. Murmuring a muted, "There, there, now. There, there."

He told her to go ahead and cry all she wanted. To get it out of her system because everything would be all right very soon; it would because he'd make it so, and she was a nice girl. She'd done a bad thing, but she was still a nice girl. One of the very nicest. So, uh, well, there you were. The prince would marry the princess and take her off to his flamin' castle, and they'd all live happily forever after.

From the early afternoon sun, a shaft of light streamed brilliantly through the window. It inched its way forward, cautiously, as though not quite sure of its reception. For a moment it even paused; seemed about to withdraw. Then, the moment passing, the dust-flecked brilliance grew brighter still: Good gathering strength from its welcome in a naughty world. Its advance firmed, bringing it surely and steadily into the room, until it at last illuminated the man and the girl. The tough cop in a wheelchair, and the young Negro

girl kneeling at his side. Each with his own handicap, his own minus quality. Each finding a kind of kinship with the other; the two minuses multiplied to become a plus.

"Rains into the flamin' sea, don't it?" Ironside mumbled. "Still salt, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir." The dark head moved up and down against his chest. "Yes, Chief."

"Sun sets, but the sun also rises, don't it?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, yes, Chief!"

"There, there," Ironside said. "There, there."

And the sunlight closed around them, and found them good.

XVII

• She didn't know whether Chuck Glover had received any death threats. He had told her practically nothing about himself, filling their time together with his subtle torturing of her.

She was positive that no one had been in the car with them, and that no one had been lurking near the car. After fleeing the scene of the fight, she had turned around and come back a little way. And she had seen Glover suddenly topple forward, knocking Mark to the pavement as he fell. Badly frightened, she had fled again. Getting herself well out of the neighborhood before she put in an anonymous call to the police from a booth telephone.

Chuck had had a couple of drinks bought for him—by whom, she didn't know—at the Lullaby Bar & Grille. Her own drinks hadn't been real ones, but the usual "hostess specials"—plain water colored with tea.

That was about all she could tell Ironside. He told her there was nothing she could do to help Mark at this point. If and when the case came to trial, of course, she would be very useful as a defense witness.

"Sure, I could have stuck her," Ironside admitted, as he talked to Sergeant Brown later that afternoon. "Probably stuck her on three or four charges. But that wouldn't help Mark any, so why bother?"

"Why wouldn't it help Mark?" Ed asked. "She was an accessory to Chuck Glover's attack, and Mark had a right to defend himself."

"But not with deadly weapons—his fists, in other words. He could only use them legally, if his life were in danger, which it clearly wasn't."

"But, dammit, what else would he use but his fists?"

"I'm with you," Ironside shrugged. "But the law says Mark had no right to use his fists, and Coleman Duke will see to it that the law is enforced. So that's that, and how were things in Chicago?"

"Well—excuse me, Chief." Ed stifled a yawn. "Well, I'd say that Nedra Glover's alibi wouldn't stand up to a firm shaking. Those three people she was supposedly with on the night of Brother Chuck's death are covering up something. Either she actually wasn't with them that night, or—"

"—or they're not sure whether she was. Which means that they were passed out, or she's got a helluva lot to explain. But we'll let it ride for the moment. I don't want to embarrass them, or jeopardize their positions in the community unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Mmm-hmm," said Brown drowsily. "Well—"

"Wake up!" Ironside said sharply, and as Ed started and sat up, "I want to ask you a question. What did Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm and Babe Duke have in common with Chuck Glover?"

"Easy. All no-goodniks."

"Right. And to someone who didn't have all the facts, this girl Carol LeMoyne would appear to be in the same class, wouldn't she? OK, then," Ironside continued. "Miss Chisholm is killed, and Babe Duke gets stuck for it. Chuck Glover is killed, and Mark gets stuck for it. But suppose, now just suppose that Glover had collapsed at the wheel while driving instead of getting in a fight with Mark. Then, what would have happened?"

Ed said that was another easy one, in view of Glover's record for speeding: He and the girl would both have had it.

"Killed in the wreck, yes?" Ironside persisted. "Obvious crash victims."

"Couldn't be more obvious. As obvious as Babe Duke's hit-and-run killing of Eleanor Chisholm."

"Babe said she appeared to jump in front of his car."

"So what? He had to say something. Anyway, it's still hit-and-run."

"And what would it be if she was thrown—already dead at the time the car struck her?"

Ed didn't answer immediately. His fatigue-reddened eyes were closed as he sagged on the lounge. His face was dark with stubble. He had taken off his coat and tie and left them in the bedroom, so there was no concealment for his wilted and sweat-soiled shirt.

Ironside looked at him with satisfaction, and repeated his question. "How about it, my friend? What would it be?"

"Bigamy," groaned Brown. "Barratry, bestiality, bean soup—how do I know, for Pete's sake? I'm so tired I don't even know my own name, and why the devil I can't at least have a shave and—"

"You can. Very soon now. Just as soon as Dr. Forrester has a chance to see you."

"Swell," Ed mumbled. "I can hardly— *Dr. Forrester!*" he exclaimed. "I look like I'd been on a six-week drunk, and you're introducing me to Forrester!"

"Mmm, well, not exactly," Ironside said, and he filled his glass to the brim with whiskey. "Now, I want to add one more little touch before our esteemed city-county medical examiner arrives, which should be any minute now. So . . ."

He rolled his chair over to the lounge, murmured a word of apology and threw the whiskey on Sergeant Brown.

Ed stared at him, speechless, unmoving. After a long moment, he said, "Thank you. Thank you, very, very much. I don't know what I would have done without that."

"Now, let's not be bitter," Ironside said. "I had to do it."

"Of course, of course, you did," Ed said. "You didn't have any gasoline handy, so how else could you have set me on fire?"

Ironside said that might be an idea, but it wasn't the one he had in mind. "You see, I don't like Dr. Forrester's language. He uses the words 'apparently' and 'obviously' too much."

"Oh," drawled Ed. "Well, you should have said so in the first place, and I wouldn't have known any more than I do now."

And bearded, rumpled, soiled, stained and smelling to high heaven, he fell asleep on the lounge. Which is where and how the medical examiner saw him for the first time.

Dr. Forrester was an extremely busy man. Pestered by complaining taxpayers, city and county fathers had put their heads together, with the eventual result that certain public offices which had once been maintained separately—one for the city, and one for the county—were combined, among them the office of medical examiner. So Dr. Forrester had to do the work of two men. Or, more accurately, due to the perpetual shortage of qualified help, he often had to do the work of three or four men.

A top man in his profession, he had taken a job in public service as a matter of civic duty, and at a considerable financial sacrifice. And his reward for so doing was near-exhaustion, the virtual giving up of his family life, and very, very little appreciation from the public which employed him. It was small wonder then, that after a quick look at Ed Brown, he was somewhat testy in his attitude toward Ironside.

"You summoned me over here for *this*?" he demanded. "I'm snowed under with work, and you have me rush across town to examine a common drunk?"

"I'm sorry," Ironside apologized. "But this man is involved in a very important case; in fact, he may be the key to it. So I thought it best to have the expert opinion of a man of science. Someone of international standing, such as yourself."

"Well. . . ." The doctor was considerably mollified by the compliment. "Very well, then. My expert opinion is that this man is heavily intoxicated. He's probably consumed a fifth of whiskey within the last few hours, not to mention the amount he's had before then. That's it, Chief," Forrester concluded. "He's been drunk for several days."

"Mmm-hmm!" Ironside nodded solemnly. "But just so we can be absolutely positive—in case the matter goes to court, you know—would you run the usual tests on him? Blood, urine and so on?"

"But it's not necessary! He's obviously—"

"Please," Ironside urged. "It's very important, Doctor. Strictly between the two of us, I think it may be connected with the Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm and Charles Glover cases."

"Yes?" the doctor frowned. "How could it be?"

"You did the autopsies in those cases, didn't you?"

"Who else? As short-staffed as I am, I have to do virtu-

ally every important postmortem. But what's that got to do—"

"I'm not at liberty to say right now. But please do as I ask, Doctor. Take your samples, run your tests and let me know the results. I'll regard it as a personal favor."

Forrester sighed, then shrugged. He shook Ed Brown awake and hustled him into the bathroom.

He came out a few minutes later, snapping his medicine kit shut, nodding briskly to Ironside. "I'll get on this right away, since it's so important to you. Bring the results over for you on my way home."

"Thank you very much," Ironside said, and reached for the telephone.

XVIII

• A few minutes of sleep had done wonders for Ed Brown. Added to a bath, a shave and a general refurbishing, he not only felt like a new man, but also looked like one as he came out of the bedroom. Ironside finished his telephoning, and turned to face him. He let out a snarl of protest.

"Why, you flamin' thief, you! That's my very best tie and shirt!"

"Now, Chief," Ed grinned. "You wouldn't want people to think you were cheap, would you?"

"And you're wearing about forty dollars' worth of cologne!"

"Oh, well," Ed said, "you know how us drunks are. Anyway, you want me to smell pretty for the doctor, don't you?"

Ironside chuckled, and broke into laughter. Becoming serious again, he motioned for the sergeant to sit down. "I've been drivin' you pretty hard these last few days, Ed. Got no flamin' right to ask you for anything else until you've had some rest. But—"

"*But!*" Ed rolled his eyes. "Here it comes!" Then, seeing Ironside's expression, "I'm OK, Chief. Good for a long time yet. What is it you want me to do?"

"Make a check on that ambulance driver." Ironside tore a slip of paper from his note pad, and handed it to him. "Go out to his house and talk to him. I want to know why—well, never mind. You've seen Eve's report, and you know what to ask."

"I think so," Ed nodded. "What about you? Won't you be needing me tonight?"

"Nope. I'll use my driver from the police pool if I have to go out. Just do your check on Smitty, and go on home."

"What if I hit on something important?"

"If," said Ironside, "is always a different story. But—" He broke off, hearing the muted *whirr* of the elevator. With a meaningful glance at Ed, he leaned back in his chair. Sat whistling softly as the elevator arose and disgorged its passenger.

Dr. Forrester crossed the room hurriedly, thrust a thin sheaf of forms at Ironside. "There you are, Chief. Tests turned out just as I predicted. Not that there was ever any doubt about it, of course."

"Very good," Ironside said vaguely. "By the way, shake hands with Sergeant Brown."

The two men shook hands, exchanged the usual greetings. Forrester sat down on the lounge next to Ed, waited as Ironside carefully examined his report.

The chief finished reading the last page. He laid it down with the others, gave Forrester a long, thoughtful look.

"Dr. Forrester," he said. "Did you run these lab tests yourself?"

"As a matter of fact, no. Very simple tests; no reason why I should bother with them."

"You say they were very simple. Then I assume you told the lab man that—that they were tests on a person who was obviously drunk?"

"Well? What about it? He *was* obviously drunk!"

"Another question. In your autopsies on Eleanor Chisholm and Charles Glover, did you also assume that the obvious or apparent causes of death were the actual ones? And did you make that opinion—an opinion based on the obvious—known to your staff before the autopsies were actually performed?"

Forrester's mouth tightened. "All right," he said coldly. "I can't and don't perform every detail of an autopsy, and I

don't pretend to. And if I care to offer an opinion to a worker as a guideline, something that will expedite his task, there's certainly nothing wrong in doing so."

"There could be, Doctor. It could result in very serious wrong. Did you ever hear of the so-called 'sink test'?"

"The sink test!" Forrester exploded. "Now, see here, Chief! If you think I'm going to sit here and listen to insults—"

"The sink test," Ironside repeated. "There's been considerable scandal about it around the country. The lab technician takes a blood or urine specimen, tosses it into the sink and writes his report from preconceived notions. Which," he held up the several sheets of the diagnosis on Ed Brown, "is exactly what happened in this case."

"W-why—why," Forrester sputtered, "that's simply not true! It couldn't be! The man I examined was sodden drunk; apparently been drunk for days! And how you can—"

"Uh-uh. Take a good look at Sergeant Brown, Doctor."

"But—" Forrester glanced at Ed "—but what's that got to do with—"

His voice trailed away. His eyes went back to Brown, stayed there, slowly widening. A deep, red flush came into his face, gave way gradually to a sickly paleness.

He turned back to Ironside, shook his head tiredly. "What can I say, Chief? If you knew how busy we were, how hard I drive myself—but that's no excuse. There is no excuse when a man simply botches his job."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Ironside said. "Mistakes have been made; the thing to do now is unmake them. And I'm sure you're as anxious to do that as I am."

"Thank you. I'll do anything and everything I can."

"Good. I'm starting a recheck of the homicide files in the morning. Going to pull every case that's even slightly suspicious for another autopsy. But right now, tonight—providing you're willing to work tonight . . ."

"I am. And tomorrow night, too, and as long thereafter as you feel necessary."

"Thank you. Well, starting tonight, then . . ."

Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm's body would be the first for a reposting, he said. Due to the absence of any relatives, there would be no preliminary formalities, no permission to be obtained. A repost on Chuck Glover would come

next, after getting his sister's permission, or, if she refused it, obtaining a court order. "But I'll take care of that," Ironside promised. "By the time you're through with the Chisholm autopsy, I'll have the tracks clear for a repost on Chuck Glover's remains."

Dr. Forrester nodded and arose. He took a step toward the elevator, then hesitated and turned around,

"Chief?"

"Yes?" Ironside said.

"Could you tell me what you suspect was the cause, or causes, of death? I could work faster if I knew what to look for."

"I could tell you what to look for," Ironside nodded. "But are you sure you want me to? Wouldn't you prefer to proceed with a completely open mind?"

Forrester hesitated again. But for only the briefest of seconds. Then, "Yes," he said firmly. "Yes, I would and I will."

He departed. As the elevator door clanged shut behind him, Sergeant Brown shook his head pityingly.

"Now, there," he said, "was one shook-up sawbones. Felt pretty sorry for him, didn't you?"

"I did," Ironside said. "In fact, I'm afraid I used up my entire stock of sorrow on him, and have none left for other people who slip up on their jobs. And speaking of that . . ."

"I'm going," Ed said hastily. "In fact, I've already gone."

And he was, and had.

Ironside completed a few last-minute duties, then descended to the garage and entered his van. His rugged features brooding and thoughtful, he rode out through the late-evening traffic to the Glover mansion.

Eleanor Chisholm, Babe Duke and Chuck Glover. Three of a kind. And Carol LeMoyne, the Negro girl, had seemed to be of the same kind. So there were four in all, then; four people destined for death and disaster. The real and apparent similarities between them, and the destined method of their disposal, were too glaring to brush aside. Too great to be dismissed as coincidence. They were links in the same chain, a chain which must inevitably lead back to the same nemesis: that person—man or woman—who had chosen them as victims and used basically the same m.o. to strike out at them.

Mark Sanger's involvement had been unintended. The Killer had meant for Glover and Carol to die in a car crash. So he had—

Or had he? Wasn't one Chief Ironside's theorizing somewhat more than tinged with wishful thinking? How could it be otherwise with Mark Sanger's liberty and possibly his life at stake?

There was such a thing as luck. The law of averages. There were no absolutes in the world; nothing was immune to accident, happy or otherwise. And even a stopped clock is right twice a day. So, on at least two autopsies, the diagnoses could have been correct.

Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm could have died of hit-and-run. Chuck Glover could have died of a beating by Mark Sanger.

But they didn't, dammit! Ironside scowled. Know flamin' well they didn't!

Someone, someone ostensibly with a disordered mind, had killed the two. Administered a slow poison or a fatal dose of narcotic. Why had that someone, the Killer, done it? Because he had suffered badly at the hands of their type, had become fed up with it.

There was your motive; there your method. So there was not the slightest reason to consider the proprietor of the Lullaby Bar & Grille suspect. His flippancy had gotten to Ironside—his reference to the police as fuzz; and a little bit of needling had seemed in order. But the proprietor was interested only in money, in protecting his investment, and the Killer was not. Equally important, the proprietor was pinned down to his business, without the freedom of movement which the Killer would have to have. So he, the bar owner, was out of the picture. Which left only two people who could be fitted into it.

There was Smitty, the ambulance driver, a frequenter of hospitals where drugs might be pilfered. A man who might become murderously sickened by the tragedies wrought by the wanton and wicked. Certainly, he was torn by some inner turmoil, something that made him lash out at the smallest provocation. Certainly, he might come into physical conflict with his eventual victims, and need makeup to conceal the evidence of that conflict.

Yes, a pretty good case could be made against Smitty. The only thing against it was an intangible: Ironside's un-

reasonable hunch that it could be knocked apart much more readily than he had put it together. How he didn't know; he was somehow blind to the fingerpost which pointed plainly to Smitty's innocence. A small thing which explained everything. All Ironside knew was that he had a hunch, one that perversely strengthened, rather than weakened, with the addition of each nominal black mark against the ambulance driver. So, believing very strongly in his hunches, knowing they were only the silent voice of a subconscious which saw all and was incapable of forgetting . . .

Nedra Glover.

A nurse, with ready access to drugs.

A woman with a brother who was enough to make her hate all of his kind.

A woman with friends who must alibi for her—who had to say where she was because they couldn't swear where *they* were or admit to a weakness which would make them pariahs in the very places where they had to exist.

A patently repressed woman; a bulging bundle of emotions which inevitably must burst its bonds.

The drinking was one form of release, but was it enough? Or was it acceptable to an id so narrowed by her life? Wouldn't the drinking itself become another source of fury: a cause for self-hate, intolerable to its host and hence hurled against others.

Nedra Glover.

She was easily the best suspect Ironside had, assuming that his hunch about Smitty was right.

In fact, she was the only suspect.

The corps of gardeners was absent from the mansion grounds tonight. A maid opened the door for him, and he saw that the horde of household cleaning people was also gone.

The maid was wearing a hat and coat, dressed to go out. "Help's night off," she smiled at Ironside. "All of us, yessir. You make it upstairs all right by yourself?"

Ironside said he could, and they exchanged good-nights. Then she hurried out the door, closing it with a little bang which echoed and reechoed through the great living room. Rising upward to the almost invisibly distant ceiling, then descending slowly, interminably, to the man in the wheelchair.

So he wheeled across the glossy floor; entered the eleva-

tor. So he was alone in the house with Nedra Glover. So what about it, anyway? Here he was and here she was, and that was that.

Wouldn't do to have a cop hovering protectively at his elbow. Too inhibiting. A warning sign to Miss Glover, a signal to watch her step and her speech. Something that would immediately choke off the revelatory word or movement which she might otherwise give way to. Nor would the spirit inside the crippled body admit the need for the presence of another.

A cop protecting another cop! Now, that would be a fine flamin'sight, wouldn't it? *Bah!*

Might as well wear a lace cap, *blue for a boy*, and have a nurse taggin' after him with a supply of diapers!

Now, he wouldn't have minded having a gun. A gun would be entirely proper. Unfortunately, for a man wedged into a wheelchair, a gun could become maddeningly uncomfortable. And it was as much an invitation to trouble as protection from it. The edge was all with one's able-bodied opponent. A wheelchair was no match for good legs. As you tried to maneuver a chair with one hand, and draw and fire with the other, he might well appropriate your weapon and make you eat it.

So, except in very special circumstances, Ironside wore no gun. Since those circumstances had not appeared to exist today, he wore none now.

The elevator stopped at the third-floor mezzanine. The chair and its occupant came out onto the railed balcony, proceeded down the narrow areaway between the wall and balustrade. Then, a moment or two passing, the forward movement slowed, and the chair whipped around in a three-hundred-sixty-degree turn.

Frowning, Ironside looked back up the brief distance he had just traversed.

What was it he had heard? What the flamin'—

Wrong question. What was it he *badn't* heard? What significant omission had created this unnatural stillness, a vacuum crying out to be filled?

He shifted his eyes to the fretworked wood of the balcony railing, the handiwork of some long-dead craftsman. He had toiled lovingly, and well, whoever he was, building great strength into a minor masterpiece of seeming delicacy. But that had been ages ago, before the turn of the cen-

tury probably. And now the strength was gone, all but vanished with its creator. And his creation was incipiently, if figuratively, ashes which he had literally become.

There, then, was where the danger lay. In the time-weakened balustrade. That was the thing to watch.

Watching it, staying so close to the wall that he brushed against it, Ironside went back up the areaway toward the elevator. Not looking for it, since there was no apparent need to. Measuring the distance as his eyes traveled along the mezzanine railing. And behind him, a door opened, a door left imperceptibly ajar to insure silence.

Nedra Glover crept out of the room. Grimacing with hideous delight, her face twisted with fury, she crept soundlessly along behind him. Barely breathing. Moving shadow-like at the slightest swaying of his chair to stay always at his back. Her hands half-extended claws, ready to grab and shove when the soon-to-be time came.

Ironside came to the end of the wall. To the set-back aperture of the elevator entrance. Automatically, his chair turned inward. And *inward*. And—

He gasped. Uttered a half-strangled cry of alarm.

Hair literally standing on end, he fumbled frantically at the control lever. Somehow brought the chair around; faced an empty blackness where the elevator should have been.

It was gone, descended into the depths below. The door, of course, stood open in deceptive and deadly invitation.

Shock momentarily immobilized him. Held him there at the brink of the pit looking downward.

A three-story drop! Three—no, twice that! Six stories! It would have to be in a house this old.

Early elevators, and this would be one of the earliest ones, were hydraulically rather than electrically operated. They were pushed instead of pulled upward, their movement controlled by a heavy steel shaft (affixed to the bottom of the car) instead of cables. Needless to say, the shaft had to be as long as the building was tall. Which meant that, to accommodate it, when the elevator stood at ground level, there had to be a pit of the same depth as its length.

Six stories! Ironside thought. Six flamin' stories!

Ironside shook the cold sweat from his brow. His hand found the console again, its tiny gear-lever. Cautiously, manipulating for a slow backward movement, he put it in reverse.

There was an ultrasoft purr from the motor, but the chair remained stationary. Frowning, he geared down for more power, and tried again. The motor purred louder. A kind of protesting shudder rocked the chair. But it stayed where it was, still poised at the brink of a pit from which there would be no return.

Carefully, he lifted his hand from the console, let it swing free with the other hand. For a moment he sat very, very still. Then, slowly, ever so slowly, he turned his head, looked up over his shoulder.

Into the contorted features of Nedra Glover.

Their eyes met and held. She grinned horribly, baring her tightly clenched teeth.

"Gotcha!" she gritted. "Gotcha, gotcha!"

And she suddenly lunged and shoved.

The chair moved this time. Forward. Inch by inch. Up to the very brink of the shaft. There was an instant of insane teetering then, the front wheels all but over the edge, poised halfway in nothingness. Then, and then—

Then, the teetering ceased and the wheels dropped over the edge, into nothingness.

XIX

• Night came up from the east, touching, probing the city with delicate fingers of duskiess, then spreading its arms wide and rushing in like a lover to envelop the sprawling metropolis.

Golden Gate Bridge blossomed into a river of light. The Top o' the Mark blinked happily in a darkling sky. To the west, a softly imperious breeze dusted the bay, moving a patch of fog from one place to another. Lifting it from a liner and dropping it over a tug, trying it out on a tuna clipper. Hurrying from here to there with an occasional playful splash of spray at a launch. Calmly ignoring the throaty hoots and blasts which accompanied its efforts.

Sergeant Ed Brown stopped his car at the curb, indulging in a luxurious yawn and stretch before getting out. Then, having tossed away his cigarette, he slid across the seat and climbed out the door. Glanced up the stretch of hedge-bordered sidewalk to the modest dwelling at its terminus.

It was small but attractive. In good repair, and painted not too long ago. Plant boxes stood in each of the two windows, and rose bushes surrounded the porch.

Ed went up the walk, and mounted the steps. Crossing to the door, he raised his hand to knock. Then he paused, lowering his fist; listened, frowning, to the voices inside.

One was a man's mild voice; reasoning, almost begging. The other—well, Ed just wasn't sure about it. It was less a voice than a rumble, an ominous sound which contrarily refused to be quieted by any amount of reasoning and begging. Rather, it seemed aggravated by attempts at appeasement, growing so threatening and thunderous as to literally shake the small house.

Smitty, Ed Brown decided. Only the bad-tempered, perpetually surly Smitty could own such a voice. Ed waited, hand poised, for an instant's hiatus in the racket which would allow a knock to be heard. It came, and he pounded on the door. And a moment or two later, the door was flung open.

"Well?" A mighty and menacing rumble. "What d'ya want?"

Ed fell back a step, sucking in his breath with surprise. "Uh, Smitty," he managed to say. "Mr. Smith, I mean."

The rumbler was a *woman!* The whoppingest biggest dame he had ever seen in his life. She filled the doorway, a massive tower of flesh with thigh-size arms and a bosom like the Grand Tetons. Her great feet were encased in tennis shoes, and her legs would have been the envy of a colossus. Her hair was cut short, frizzed out on her head like an exploding haystack. Topping the ballooning flesh of her face, with its button nose, it gave her the appearance of a noncalorie-conscious sphinx.

The slight figure of a man was behind her, nervously trying to make his presence known. One of the woman's huge arms went back and wrapped itself around his head; and she dragged him with her as she stepped out onto the porch.

"What d'ya want with my husband?" she rumbled at Ed. "What's the little bum done now?"

"I haven't said he's done anything," Ed said. "I simply want to talk to him."

There was a squeak from the headlocked Smitty. "You see, dear? You see? I haven't done—"

"Shaddup! What d'ya want to talk to him about, Copper?"

"I have some questions to ask him. Now, if you'll please—"

"What kinda questions?"

"Lady," Ed snapped, "this is police business. Now, do I talk to Mr. Smith here or do I do it down at the station?"

The woman hesitated, glowering at him. Then her vast shoulders moved in a shrug. "So talk to him," she said. And shifting her hold suddenly, she grabbed Smitty by the collar and the seat of his pants, and hurled him bodily at the sergeant.

He landed on target, Smitty did. Striking against Ed with the impact of a flying missile. Clutching wildly at each other, they sailed off the porch together. Landed in a tangle amidst the thorny tangle of rose bushes.

The woman dusted her hands, and went back inside the house.

Several exceedingly painful minutes later, Brown and Smitty emerged from the bushes to the lawn.

Ed's face was crisscrossed with scratches. His left eye was beginning to swell. The shoulder of his coat had burst its seams, and a large triangular gap ventilated the seat of his pants.

Smitty studied him critically, and declared him relatively fit. "Been in lots worse shape myself. Lucky she was in a good mood tonight."

"You," said Ed, "have got to be kidding."

"Guess she must've liked you," Smitty said. "Want to use some of my makeup? I got a little with me."

"Thanks. I think I'd better buy some of my own," Ed said. "I figure I'm going to need quite a bit."

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Ed decided he didn't want to talk to him about anything, now. Smitty's nominal and suspicious peculiarities were all explained by his wife.

Married to a dame like that, a guy had damned well better keep hustling for dough! Smitty had no choice but to chase about the city, literally running the wheels off his ambulance to make a buck. As for his bad temper, well, what could you expect? Naturally, he'd be half sore all the time; fed up with taking it and all set to do some dishing-out for a change. So . . . well, there you were. Everything—the use of cosmetics and everything else, had been satisfactorily explained.

All Ed wanted now was peace and quiet; to pray devoutly that no one would guess the reason for the damage to his person.

A cop getting roughed up by a *woman*! A *cop*! Now, that would really tear it! Even a noncop, a male civilian,

would almost never file a complaint against a woman. She might beat his ears off, but he just wouldn't do it. Because it is somehow regarded as funny when a woman attacks a man. It shouldn't be, but it is. The newspapers write jokingly about it. The newscasters chuckle over it. Associates and friends kid the pants off the guy; make deadpan offers to be his manager, and match him with *their* wives. ("She fights at ninety-eight pounds, kid, but I think you can take her!")

Smitty was waiting, looking up at him. "Well, what about it, fellow? What'd you want to ask me?"

"Nothing," Ed said. "Nothing at all."

"Yeah? All this frammis, and you don't want to ask me anything?"

A scowl was settling over his thin face. The threat of impending violence. Wearily, Ed said all right, he did have one question.

"Why in the world did you ever marry that woman?"

"What?" asked Smitty. "What did you say?"

"I said, why did you ever marry that woman?"

"That's an insult!" yelled Smitty, and he bopped Ed on the nose.

Ed went down on the lawn on his back. He stayed down as the ambulance driver danced around him for a moment, fiercely shadowboxing, then dusted his hands and marched into the house. Yes, Ed stayed right where he was for a time, half wishing that someone would put a lily in his hand and mound him over with dirt.

He had good reason, of course, to arrest Smitty. But if he did that, he would have to relate the events leading up to the bopping. Which would inevitably bring Smitty's wife into the picture. Which would mean that he, Sergeant Ed Brown, would be laughed at and joked about beyond his ability to endure.

In the wind-roiled sky, a star edged out cautiously from a mass of fog; peered downward curiously at the man on the ground. As it examined him, Ed had no satisfactory explanation to offer.

"It's just the way it is," he sighed. "A policeman's lot is not a happy one."

XX

• The piano player, that unreasonable facsimile thereof, was doing all right tonight. When you suddenly jump a six-bag habit to eight, you *have* to do all right. Man, you just have to! For a time at least. You do it without doing it. Simply by opening a vein and letting the whole wondrous world rush in and take over, doing everything that needs doing for you. Wiping your chin or combing your hair or arguing with the fuzz or playing the piano. The world is you, and you're it and everything is as smooth an' easy as *di-wah-didy*. Like now, when the world-you is making the ol' eighty-eighty rise right up in meetin' an' declare itself, a-weavin' and a-rockin' with the glorious tidings that, "It Must Be Jelly, 'Cause Jam Don't Shake Like That."

Want a little backin', a little helpin'-out? Well, just send up a signal . . . "Yaka Hula" . . . "Chong" . . . "Lime-house" . . . "Jada" . . . "Dardanella" . . . "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" . . . an' you got it, the very best that ever was. The truly great ones. Euday Bowman. (Got a big fifty bucks for writin' "12th Street Rag.") Kenny Martin. (Who says you can't play with a skinful of booze?) Wingy Mangnone. (Baby, you play more trumpet with one arm than the top men with two.) Blue Steele. . . .

You go into "Beale Street," all of you, you go right there

to Beale an' the street's just like it used to be. All the sights an' sounds an' smells, with everyone fat an' sassy an' busy, or actin' busy 'cause young Boss Crump, he don't like no easy riders. (*Easy Ridin', Man*) Mr. Crump. An' when one of them long, limber gals rolls her hips at you, why you just vamp till you find the beat, an' then you move in real low-down, diggin' the sugar out of the bottom of the cup, an' when you got it all you just steps right up an' pops the question, "Is You Is, or Is You Ain't My Baby?"

Figures moved out of the smoky, stinking, stinging fog which passed for air in the place. Slowly, they clustered around the piano player. A senselessly grinning Ape. A perpetually, silently cackling Witch. A horned Devil, with a tail draped over his shoulder. A chalk-faced, scarlet-mouthed vampire.

Demons, monsters, goblins. . . .

They gathered around the piano player, arms fraternally draped around one another's shoulders, swaying and beating time to the sound of the music. And he, the piano player, looked up, looked around him, and began to scream.

The scream was all but inaudible. A muted, gasping burble; the counterpart of the scream in a nightmare, the terrified shriek for help which no one ever hears. Staggering up from his bench, the piano player lunged through the hideous creatures, scattering them left and right; then, at a stumbling half-run, fled blindly into the rest room.

He braced his body against the door, trying to hold it shut. But something, someone, pressed firmly against it, and he heard a familiar voice, rather he heard words that were familiar—soothing and explanatory—for the voice itself was strained of identity by its owner's disguise.

The piano player stepped away from the door. It opened, and God came in. No other than God, self-appointed. For it follows, as the night the day, that one who elects to kill assumes the role of Deity.

The Killer was a Skeleton tonight—a phosphorous-paint skeleton etched upon a black shroud. He took the piano player by the elbow, turned him around facing the wavery mirror of the rest room and pointed.

"Remember?" he said. "It's a very special party, a masquerade. There's nothing to be afraid of."

The piano player looked into the mirror. He saw a ridiculously dished-in mask of a face, with a bulbous nose. He

saw the velvet cap, its belled peak crumpled to hang over his forehead. He looked down the length of his tight-fitting velvet costume, to the cloth-covered slippers with their long pointed toes, tinily-belled and curling up at the ends.

The piano player slowly nodded, relieved. He said, "Ohhh," drawing the word out, letting God know that he understood. Then:

"'For a cap and bells our lives we pay,
'Bubbles we buy with the whole soul's tasking.'"

"Very good," the Killer said approvingly. "Very good," and concluded the stanza:

"'Heaven alone is given away,
'Only God may be had for the asking.'"

The piano player nodded again. "A Fool, naturally. What else would I be but a Fool?"

"Now, now," the Killer said. "It's a compliment. Fools are among our very finest people. Why, there is no place in the world today where great decisions are being made, where men are in trouble or conflict, where you won't find a fool."

The piano player sighed bleakly. Wearily, resigned. He mumbled that there was a time for sowing and a time for reaping; to take the cash and let the credit go, nor heed the thunder of a distant drum.

"Now, that's better," the Killer said heartily. "Got your kit with you? Well, go ahead and shoot up, then. There's plenty of time. Our guest isn't arriving for well over an hour—almost an hour and a half."

The piano player's heart took a little jump. Fingers clumsy with eagerness, he started to reach inside his costume, to bring out the needle and the spoon with the hooked handle. Then, with a tremendous effort he made himself stop; looking silently at the Killer, hinting, lying to him with his hesitation. Or, perhaps, not lying in the larger sense. For no one actually ever has *enough*; he cannot have something that has never been defined. He may have less than enough and he may have more than enough, but he can never have enough.

The Killer took note of the hint. He decided it was time,

the piano player's time, to have the never-defined enough.

"Go ahead," he urged quietly. "Go right ahead and shoot. I'll give you another cap to take after the party. Straight stuff. A fix like you never had before."

"W-well . . ." The piano player looked at him. After a time, he nodded slowly. "All right," he said. "All right."

He shot up. The Killer clapped him on the back, and gave him the promised cap. The one that would finally be enough. Then he left the rest room, telling himself that it had had to be done. An imperfect machine had slipped past the Inspector, and its imperfection had grown to such dimensions that it was no longer safe to operate.

Destroy it? Oh, no. The Killer didn't kill; God didn't destroy. He simply decided that certain of his creations needed to be recalled to the Factory, there to be repaired, if, in his opinion, repairing rather than scrapping seemed indicated.

As for the Fool, the piano player, he was resigned to God's will. The desire and the will and all reason to resist it had gone out of him as the heroin had gone into him. He would at last have enough. That was enough.

"'And the world so loved the god,'" he told the wavery mirror, "'that it gave him its only son; and thereafter he was driven from the Garden. And Judas wept saying, Yea, verily, I abominate onions, yet I can never leave them alone.'"

XXI

• The small front wheels of the chair had dropped over the edge, and into the elevator shaft. Now, there was a scraping of wood, a slow tipping-forward of the chair, each time Nedra Glover's fury-driven body lunged against it.

A mumbled, jumbled half-coherent torrent of words spewed out of her in an insane monotone.

"Tricked me! Made me betrayer! Show you, show you, damn you! Hounding my friends! Wrecking lives of innocent people! Been calling me all afternoon, crying and hysterical and— People with families! Good, decent people. And you, you, you! I'll kill you, kill you, kill you! . . ."

Ironside didn't try to argue with her. In her state it would have been useless. In his position, there was no time, no iota of effort to be wasted. His arms stretched as wide as they would go; he could reach the wall on either side of the shaft. Reach it with a little to spare. To an extent, then, a very small extent, he could brace himself against Nedra Glover's onslaughts, delaying the doom which lay at the bottom of the pit.

Literally, he was clinging to life by his fingertips. And he was about to lose even that small grasp upon it.

With each of her lunge-shoves, the chair tilted forward

a little more; it edged forward a little more. And his grip on the wall shortened. If he used one hand to hold himself in the chair, he could momentarily forestall being pitched out of it. But axiomatically, he would lose as much as he gained. The chair would move forward that much faster. He and it would go into the abyss together.

Can't win for losing, he thought grimly. Damned if I do and damned if I don't!

Her weight hit the chair again. And he thought, thought . . .

How had she managed the open shaft, the door standing open? Easy. Removed a bolt from the hinged opening-bar. So after it had opened automatically upon reaching the floor, it had stayed that way. The car itself, of course, was set to return to the first floor after each use.

But—but—foolproofing required by law. Car couldn't operate with door open. So—so how— Easy. Emergency switch in case door stuck accidentally. With switch pulled, car would run with shaft door open. So—

The forward pressure eased. Nedra was drawing back for another lunge. It began, her arms stiffening against his chair. Suddenly, his fingers let go the walls, his hands whipped around behind his head. And he grasped her firmly by the wrists.

She couldn't stop her lunge. With nothing to mitigate its force, the chair went far forward, and he found himself looking almost straight down the shaft.

And held by him, tugged as gravity tugged at him, Nedra Glover rose up on her toes, felt them slide slightly along the carpet. And she screamed.

"N-n-n-n-n-o! No!"

Ironside grunted with satisfaction. "Well, roots? All set for a dive?"

"Let go! *L-l-let go!*" She jerked and struggled frantically. "*L-l-let go!* Please, please, please! . . ."

"Not a chance. We go in together, or stay out together."

"P-please! Oh, God! P-please let me—"

"I will. Just as soon as you pull me back!"

"B-but I can't! I *can't*. I—" The chair tilted. She rose completely off her feet, let out a burbling, choked scream. "Let me go! Just let me go! You'll have to let me go before I—H-help!"

Slowly, the chair sagged backward again. Once again her

feet were on the floor. Sweat poured from Ironside's body in rivers, and Nedra Glover hysterically wept and laughed, begged, promised, threatened. And cursed him.

"Can't you see, damn you? How can I do anything when you're hanging onto me?"

"Pull backward! Brace your feet and pull."

"B-but—"

She tried. The chair stayed where it was, teetering on the brink of eternity.

With her wrists in his grasp, she could not bring her full weight to bear, could not exert her full strength. And possibly it was too late, anyway. She had gone too far. The damage could not be undone.

And it was not yet done.

The next time the chair teetered could well be the last time. Any minute could well be the last minute.

There they were, the trapper and the trapped. Both caught in the same trap.

Ironside forced his eyes away from the dark depths below him. There was something hypnotic about the blackness, something that coaxed and teased and urged dizziness upon him. So he dragged his eyes away from it, made them look at the wall with the elevator signal-button. He looked at it, a small, white eye in a black plastic enclosure. It seemed to stare back at him, to—

Ironside's pulse quickened. The chair began another agonizing forward movement, and Nedra Glover was again lifted screaming from her feet. Ironside forced his weight backward. Slowly, slowly the chair tilted away from the shaft to momentary safety. And his voice, shakily harsh, ordered the woman to knock off her flamin' noise and listen to him.

"I've got an idea. Not too good, maybe, but it's our only chance. Now—"

"Let me go! Just let me go, and—"

"I'll let go of one arm. You're right. Now here's what you'll have to do—"

She was interrupting, cutting him off before he could finish. Sobbing that it just wouldn't work, that he'd be crushed and she along with him. Snarling, he repeated his instructions; telling her she'd flamin' well better take the chance while she still could.

"All right. When I say *go*, you move, get me? Just do it, and don't argue. OK? All set?"

She sniffled, hesitated. "O-OK. . . ."

"Attagirl! Now, one . . . two . . . three . . . go!"

She grasped the left side of the chair with her suddenly freed hand. Simultaneously, Ironside leaned forward, jabbed the elevator signal-button, then braced his flattened palm against the wall.

The wheelchair began its delicate seesawing. Nedra struggled and wept and pleaded. And floating up from the pit came a soft *click* and the smothered throbbing of powerful machinery.

Light gleamed in the blackness. Grew stronger and stronger. Ironside's arm began to shake with strain. His sweating palm began to slip against the wall. He gasped out orders to the woman, telling her to bear down harder, to dig in and bear backward. She obeyed as best she could, but it was a far-from-perfect best. His hand continued to slip, and then abruptly it skidded off the wall and into the shaft.

There was no teetering this time. The chair slid forward, and continued to slide. Nedra Glover soared off her feet, screamed once and fainted dead away. Ironside released his hold on her; *no sense killing a nutty woman*. Now, with nothing at all to hold him back, he—

A grating sound. The chair ceased its deadly slide. The rising elevator caught under it, lifted it. The front end rose up precipitously, and then there was another grating and scraping of steel against wood. And the chair dropped with a *thud*, rolled back to the safety of the mezzanine.

XXII

• Ironside tossed down a straight, two-ounce shot of bourbon. He put another two ounces in a highball glass, added water to it and took a long, comforting swallow. From somewhere within him the cold-sweat faucet was turned off. Similarly, the give-him-the-shakes demons abandoned their fiendish chores and retired for the night. A wonderful calmness spread through him, and he muttered a silent, Oh, brother! and took another long swallow of his drink.

Miss Glover came out of the powder room. She had combed her hair and freshened her face with cold water; made herself presentable as she ever was. Ironside nodded toward the bar, but she shook her head. Seating herself, she poured a cup of black coffee from a carafe. Spoke quietly to him as she took a swallow.

"Let's get it over with, Chief. Just take me to wherever people like me are taken, and dispose of me as you see fit. I won't give you any opposition. I'll agree to a commitment for insanity, or I'll confess to assault with intent to commit murder. Whichever you wish. Whatever you wish."

Ironside was a little taken aback by her meekness. He had intended giving her a tongue-lashing, followed by a fast trip to jail for a detailed questioning. Now, these plans seemed something less than appropriate.

"Uh, not so fast," he growled. "Don't tell me what to do or what you're going to do. See to that myself in my own good time."

"Sorry."

"Get one thing straight right now," he continued. "No one leaned on your friends in Chicago. Not even a little bit. Nothing was done to threaten or frighten or embarrass them."

"Perhaps not from your viewpoint," Miss Glover nodded. "But they *were* frightened and they *were* embarrassed and they considered themselves threatened. On the point of being exposed in a way that would wreck their lives and careers. And what they feel and believe is all that matters. I—" She hesitated. "My friends are very precious to me, Chief. They stood by me, and took the place of the family I never had. I can't and won't let them be hurt in any way."

"But . . ." Ironside scowled at her. ". . . this is murder, woman! Those people were your alibi. Did you think we'd accept your unsupported word without questioning them and making completely sure they were telling the truth?"

Miss Glover looked into her coffee cup, thoughtfully set it aside. She shrugged tiredly, said that what she'd thought was of no importance.

"I deceived you the first time you were here, Chief. I pretended to get drunk, then did some pseudo-incoherent babbling about Chuck receiving death threats. I did it, of course, to divert suspicion from myself. Chuck and I were completely out of communication with each other. If anyone ever threatened his life, and if he was consequently frightened, I don't know about it." —

Ironside nodded. "I believe you. People who intend to commit murder very seldom give advance warning. Now, he may have received such threats—I have, myself—but—"

"Let me ask you a question," Miss Glover said. "And please answer it frankly. Will my friends be questioned any further?"

"If I feel it necessary, yes. I won't rule out the possibility."

"And the said possibility exists until you're completely satisfied as to my guilt or innocence?"

"You could put it that way. Incidentally, before we continue this session, I want to advise you of your constitutional rights."

Miss Glover said that she knew her rights, constitutional and otherwise. More importantly, she added, she also knew her obligations. "Kind of makes me unique these days, doesn't it, Chief?" She gave him a wanly wry smile. "We hear a lot about rights, what society owes the individual, but almost nothing concerning the individual's obligation to society."

"Mmm, so I've noticed. And you're about to break with precedent?"

"I am. Your case is closed, Chief Ironside. I killed my brother."

Ironside's brows went up. He took a meditative sip of his bourbon.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "That saves us a lot of trouble. I'll see to it that the fact is given proper consideration at your trial."

"That's all right. I'm glad to get it off my conscience."

"How did you kill him, by the way?"

"Just as your sergeant suggested," she said. "Chuck was already helpless when I found him. It didn't take much of a blow to be fatal."

"I see, I see," Ironside murmured. "And how did you kill Eleanor Chisholm?"

"*Hub?*" Miss Glover collected herself swiftly. "I, uh, did you say Eleanor Chisholm?"

"Yes. The two cases are connected. The same person killed both people."

"Oh," Miss Glover said slowly. "Oh, I—I see. Well, I'm a little unclear at the moment. It's been a very trying day, and I was in quite a state tonight. Perhaps if you, uh, could jog my memory a little?"

Ironside said to let it go for the time being. "You set up an alibi for yourself in each instance? You knocked out your secret-drinker friends with booze, and you made the round trip from Chicago and back while they were still dead to the world?"

Miss Glover nodded. "But you're not to question them about it now! There's no point in questioning them after I've already confessed."

"None at all," Ironside agreed. "Now, the third killing—"

"T-thir—I did it," she said firmly. "I'm guilty, Chief."

"Then Leon Czolgoszcz was innocent?"

"Absolutely. I—*whaat?*"

"You mean, you didn't shoot President McKinley?" Ironside inquired. "Remember, I'll have to check it out with your friends if you don't confess."

Nedra Glover reddened, made a weak attempt at meeting his eye. Quaveringly, she pointed out that she was quite capable of murder as she'd proved by the attempt on his life. Ironside snorted that anyone was capable of murder where his loved ones were concerned.

"Told you the two murders were connected, didn't I? The same person pulled both jobs. And you don't know any more about how Miss Chisholm was killed than a hog does about ice-skates. So lay off the flamin' confessions before I lose my temper with you."

Ironside finished his drink, took a somewhat hungry look at the bottom of the glass, then virtuously shook his head.

"Got to be going," he announced. "You were my last real suspect, Nedra Glover, so another will have to be dug up. And just who the blazes it'll be . . ."

His voice trailed away into a sigh, and he scowled vaguely into nothingness for a moment. Then he shook his head again, shot a stern glance at Miss Glover.

"Now, about your attempt to kill me tonight; about you in general . . . Oh, to hell with you," he said. "What d'you take me for, anyway? You tryin' to give me trouble or something? Don't I have enough problems without fooling around with a half-baked dame like you?"

Miss Glover grinned at him weakly, her eyes shining. Ironside glowered at her, and muttered an embarrassed good-night. He started toward the door, then stopped and brought his chair around again.

"Almost forgot," he said. "I'd like your permission to have another autopsy done on your brother."

"Permission granted," Miss Glover said. "I—" She broke off, staring at him. "Is it . . . is it important, Chief? Having the additional autopsy, I mean?"

"Vitaly important, in my opinion. Why?"

"Well, I—I— Oh, my goodness," she said. "I'm sorry, Chief. There can't be another autopsy."

Ironside's face darkened. He said there could and would be another one, either with her permission or by court order. Miss Glover let out an anguished cry.

"It isn't that, Chief! I wouldn't stand in your way. But—but— Well, I've been so terribly upset, and I wanted to

get all the unpleasantness over with as quickly as possible. So— And no one tried to stop me! No one told me it wasn't all right!"

A sickish hunch stirred within the Chief. "Just what," he said, "just what are you trying to tell me?"

"That. Over there."

She pointed to a corner shelf. A stout shelf, occupied by a glazed black urn. Ironside had seen such urns before. He knew the sole purpose for which they were used.

"Ashes?" he said softly.

"Ashes," she said.

"Chuck's?"

"Chuck's."

XXIII

• Drearily, Ironside rode back to his apartment headquarters. Never in his life had he felt so frustrated and defeated, so hellishly helpless. Nor could he accept the situation as one in which he was blameless.

He was in charge, was he not? He was; he and no one else. And somewhere he had overlooked a bet. Somehow he had failed to see an integrant vital to the puzzle—the one small but important piece which would complete the picture, and point the way to the killer.

It didn't occur to him, of course, that he couldn't see it because it wasn't there; that it was in all innocence and with the best of intentions being withheld from him by one of the few people he completely trusted. He only knew he had flopped, come up with little more than egg on his face. And he accepted the failure as solely his.

He had let the department down. He had let Mark Sanger down. He, Chief Robert Ironside, had botched his job. And, by blazes, it was too much to bear!

He was in a dour and bitter mood when his van pulled into the police garage. The driver helped him down from the vehicle, and Ironside thanked him for his services, and dismissed him with a courteous good-night. That just about

exhausted the Chief's supply of civilities. He could not now, he assured himself, say a nice word in church if he was given a gold watch to do so.

Seething inwardly, he started across the grease-spotted floor to the elevator, hungering for some outlet for his fury. Wishing for nothing quite so much as the ability to deliver a good, swift kick—and the justification for delivering it—to the seat of someone's pants.

As though in answer to his wish, a car door slammed in the shadowy recesses of the garage, and Coleman Duke came striding toward him. Ironside stopped his chair and waited.

Duke's charm and personality were turned on full blast; an irresistible force for moving the nominally immovable object that was Ironside. In other words, he was about as nervous as a man can be, but still determined to speak his piece. And he was speaking it, rushing out the words, before the expected blast from Ironside could cut him off.

He was undyingly grateful to the Chief, he declared; the Chief was a wonder-worker, and no praise was adequate to his desserts. There had been enough dope in Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm's body to kill a cow. She would have had to have been dead well before his son's car had struck her. The charges against his son had been dismissed, and Babe was already out of jail, and . . . and . . .

Ironside stared at him in stony silence. Duke began to slow down, his voice to falter. And in his nervousness, he blundered.

"Uh, ah . . . by the way, Chief, I can't tell you how glad I am to find you safe. You seemed to be in very serious difficulties at one point tonight. I was just about to send in some assistance when you somehow extricated yourself from the trouble, whatever it was, and, uh . . ."

"Yes?" said Ironside. "Yes, Mr. Duke?"

"Well, no matter. I've behaved very badly, and I want to make amends. I'm deeply indebted to you, and I mean to do everything in my power to clear up the debt. Which brings us to your man, Mark Sanger. Now, I've talked to Wayne Billington and he completely agrees with me that Sanger shouldn't be penalized on a technicality. If Glover's body hadn't been cremated and it was possible to perform an autopsy on it, Wayne and I are both sure that the cause of

death would be the same as it was in the case of Miss Chisholm. We're confident of it, Chief, and Wayne is prepared to say so in his official capacity as district attorney. So . . ."

That was about all Ironside could take. He silenced Duke with a sudden chopping motion of his hand. Asked just how the blazes anyone could be confident of anything in the absence of air-tight evidence.

"You've hung a big black cloud over Mark, and no amount of influence can take it away. I like him too much, owe him too much, to see him go around smeared for the rest of his life. Why, why dammit!" Ironside sputtered in fury. "Do you think he'd want that, to live out his days with people wondering about him and whispering behind his back? Do you think I'd let him in for anything like that? He has to be proved innocent, get me? Proved beyond the smallest shadow of a doubt!"

Duke shrugged easily. "Now, Chief, we're both practical men. We both know that you can't prove Sanger innocent, without proving someone else guilty. And since your very best efforts have failed to discover that someone—"

"Says who? I'm just getting started, mister!"

"Oh, come on, now. You're at a dead end. You've run out of suspects. What else can you do?"

Ironside didn't know. In his helplessness and frustration, Duke's question was as a red flag to a maddened bull.

"Now, I'll ask you something," he said coldly. "How did you know I was at a dead end; how did you know Chuck Glover's body had been cremated; how did you know I was in trouble at the Glover mansion tonight? Or, putting it another way, by what means and by what right did you acquire knowledge of my affairs at virtually the same time that I did?"

"Uh, well . . ." Coleman Duke wet his lips uneasily. "Is that really important, Chief? It seems to me that—"

"You're flamin' well right, it's important!" snapped Ironside. "And I don't give a whoop in a high wind how anything seems to you! You've pushed me a little too far, mister! I've put up with the tails on me and my people, havin' a peeper on us every time we make a move. I didn't like it, but it might have been hard to fight, so I rocked along. But now—uh-uh. The party's over. You've been using wireless bugs on us, electronic snooping devices. You, a private citizen, have been doing something that even the police are for-

bidden to do. So you get those tails off me and my staff, Mr. Duke. Get 'em off us immediately—hear me?—or I'll have you fighting criminal actions for the next umpteen years!"

Duke seemed to shrink inside his three-hundred-dollar suit. He attempted an appeasing smile, mumbled feeble words of apology. Ironside glared at him sternly, wiping out the smile, stilling the words.

"All right," Ironside said curtly. "That's it. I crack down on you, or you call off the tails. So what's it going to be?"

Duke said quickly that, of course, he would call them off. He would do so immediately. Then, humbly, "But—but perhaps you could use them, Chief. You need help, and—"

"No!" Ironside said. "No!"

"Please, Chief. I owe you a great debt. I—"

"You owe me nothing, sir. I don't take gratuities for doing my job."

Ironside nodded coldly, whirled his chair around and started for the elevator. The shipping magnate tagged after him.

"Can't we talk this over, Chief? Please? If you're not up to it tonight, perhaps you could see me—"

With startling suddenness, Ironside swung the chair around again. "No!" he said, his voice raised almost to a shout. "No, no, no! I will not see you tomorrow or the next day or any other time! I've seen enough of you to last me, a lifetime, and I don't ever want to see you again. And if you're even halfway as smart as you're supposed to be, you'll respect my wishes!"

He turned his chair toward the elevator a final time. He rolled into it, and the door clanged shut behind him. Coleman Duke looked after him sadly. Then, his shoulders sagged in defeat, he returned to his car and drove away.

Ironside arrived in his apartment just as the phone began to ring. Sergeant Brown's voice came over the wire, sheepishly begging the Chief not to laugh at what he had to say. Ironside promised he wouldn't, so Ed related the farcical results of his visit at the residence of Smitty and Smitty's oversize wife.

"That's about it," he concluded awkwardly. "I'd say he can't possibly be considered a suspect, wouldn't you?"

"I would."

"Uh . . . look, Chief, you didn't laugh even once."

"I didn't. I'm afraid I'm not in a laughing mood, Ed."

There was a moment's baffled silence. Then, "Oh," the sergeant said knowingly. "Bad time tonight, huh? N.g. on Miss Glover?"

"Yes and yes," Ironside said, "and I don't want to talk about it. Now, what's your condition after your session with the Smiths? Not very lovely to look at, I assume."

"Not," Ed agreed. "But still delightful to know, of course, and reasonably ambulatory."

Ironside told him to stay home the following day and get pretty. "I mean it," he added. "I don't know what the blazes to do myself, let alone trying to find some use for you."

"Well . . ." Ed hesitated. "I could certainly use the rest, but maybe you'd like me to come down for a while. Sort of kick it around with you. Two heads are better than one, it says here."

"Oh? And what's been your personal experience?"

"Come again?"

"As a man with two heads, I mean."

Ed groaned. "I walked right into that one. Any further walking I do in the next twenty-four hours will be in my sleep."

"Night, my friend," Ironside said.

"Night, Chief," said Ed.

And they hung up. And, meanwhile, Coleman Duke had kept his promise.

All his investigators had been called in from their assignments, including the one who had been tailing Eve Whitfield. So there was no one following her, no one who might come to her aid in an emergency, when she went to keep Belle Larabee's appointment with the Killer.

XXIV

• Eve tugged open the door of the place, and stepped hesitantly inside. Then, as the incredible stench struck her like a blow—the thick smog of stale smoke and stale bodies and stale drinks—she almost fell back. Held herself where she was only by a tremendous exertion of willpower.

She stood blinking, trying to penetrate the stinking and clouded dimness. Gradually, her eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness, and she was able to see a little. And that little brought a gasp of horror to her lips. Why it looked like . . . *like Hell!* A madman's concept of Hell!

She, Eve Whitfield, had come off a twisting San Francisco street and stepped into Hell.

She couldn't see what she was looking for. The rear table with a magazine lying open on it and a cigarette tray sitting on top of the magazine. The smog was too thick; there were too many monstrously masked and garbed figures in the way. Staggering and swaying in lunatic simulation of a dance.

Gingerly, she started to make her way through them toward the rear. Cringing a little as they brushed against her. Then, an apelike figure suddenly grabbed her and drew her close to him, grinning into her face as he violently jiggled

her up and down. She jerked away from him, taking a half-stumbling step backward. She bumped into a Devil, and he, the Devil, twirled her around with drunken gracefulness, and brought her face to face with a Frog. The Frog grasped her other wrist. Dipping and swaying, dragging Eve up and down with them, they began to dance.

A dance like no other had ever been. A quadrille, a waltz, a tango, rock'n'roll—everything and nothing. A dance to fit the preposterous music of the piano.

There was beauty in the music, or, more accurately, the memory of beauty, now as lost as a lost love; something that lay buried in an unknown dimension like the final decimal of pi. Now, as though avenging itself upon an evil and uncaring world, it had sprouted into hideousness—a seed gone mad. And its terrible blossoms of sound hinted at a greater terror to come. Here, said the music, was a taste of Armageddon. Here, the Ultima Thule. Here the inevitable destination of a planet whose mass of six sextillion, four hundred and fifty quintillion short tons was turned into a slaughterhouse instead of a garden. Here, the fruit of neglect, that socially approved form of murder. Here, the basic lie in its final extension.

A whole *was* greater than its parts . . . or was there no Bomb, no minute amalgam of neutrons and protons? Add three billion to the planet's mass, and subtract kindness and caring, and you were left not with an unkindly, uncaring three billion, but death. So said the seed, the music, now sunk in the morass of a wilderness from which it had vainly cried out. There would be no refuge from the coming terror. No place to hide. No familiar thing to cling to. Something would become nothing, robbed of its intrinsic beauty and safety, and all else. There would be only a smoking, steaming blown-apart, crushed-together mishmash where brother was himself eaten by brother while eating brother, ad nauseam, ad infinitum. Even so:

"Deutschland Uber" "Mississippi Mud" "Internationale Funeral March" "Stars Fell on" "The Star-spangled" "Shiek of Araby" "I Left My Heart in" "Black Bottom" "Rhapsody in" "Saber Dance" "Spring Song" "At Sundown" "How You Gonna Keep 'Em" "Down on the Levee" "Boo-Hoo" "Mammy" "Fire Dance" "Over There" "Toot, toot, Tootsie" "Good-bye, Forever" . . .

A Witch with thick ankles motioned curtly to the Devil and the Frog. They released their grasp on Eve Whitfield, and the Witch took her by the arm, guided her through the crowd to a rear table with an opened magazine on it and an ashtray on top of the magazine.

Eve sank gratefully down at the table, nearly breathless, a little weak from her enforced dancing. The Witch sat down near her, informed her that the party she wished to see would be along shortly.

"Now, what'll you have to drink, dear?"

"Nothing," Eve said. "I don't care for a thing, thanks."

"Got to have something. House rule," the Witch said firmly. Then, leaning closer for confidential speech, "Know how y'feel, honey. Tell you what I always do in this place. Order somethin' that ain't dolled up, y'know? Somethin' clear that you can see through, like vodka an' soda."

"But I—"

"I'll have one with you, if you'll buy. About all I got these days is the habit."

"Oh, well, of course," said Eve, and she put money into the Witch's gloved hand.

The latter went away, returned shortly with the drinks. Eve stalled, fumbling with a cigarette, until the Witch had taken a long, thirsty drink. Then, she took a tiny sip of her own drink.

It seemed all right—chloral hydrate is colorless, tasteless, odorless. Eve told herself that it would have to be all right. As Belle Larabee, she represented money to the black-mailer. He would have no reason to harm her, at least until he had collected.

So, as the Witch greedily drained her glass, Eve took a long drink from hers. She needed one after what she had been through, and with the ordeal she had still to face.

The Witch mumbled a "Drink hearty," and arose from the table. She said she would just find Eve's party herself, see to it he came to the table right away. Eve nodded her thanks, and the Witch disappeared in the crowd. But she did not immediately summon the Killer.

She meant to. More importantly, she had been ordered to by none other than the Skeleton, the Deity, himself. But even as she hurried to obey that order, she collided with a rail-thin Demon. So she stopped to talk to him, to plead

with him, for what was to be only a moment. But the Demon shook his head, shaking it more and more firmly the more urgently she pleaded. And the intended moment became a minute. Minutes.

XXV

• In the weed-grown patio behind the place, the Killer paced back and forth, occasionally smacking one gloved fist into the palm of his other hand, occasionally swinging his arm in a gesture of emphasis, or snorting out a curt laugh of triumph, as he scored in the debate within himself.

In the darkness, against the black background of the shroud, the phosphorous Skeleton moved eerily to and fro, every move exaggeratedly jerky, seeming to flop and fling itself about like a thing animated by a string.

Tonight was a very special night for the Killer. So special that he had worked himself into a fever pitch of excitement, at last crashing through the hard shell of reserve and inhibition in which he had always been contained. For tonight—the woman who was to die tonight was someone he knew. Knew as he had known no other woman. And his other victims had been strangers to him.

He knew them, naturally. He had watched them, studied them over a considerable period of time. Taking note of each of their transgressions, carefully keeping score on them, withholding his awful judgment until the score reached a certain total and they had proved themselves in need of recalling to the Factory. For he, the Killer, was a just and forbearing Deity.

They had not known him, but he had known them. Finally and regretfully (or so he told himself) weighing them on his scales and finding them wanting. Even as he had finally and regretfully (or so he told himself) been forced to do in the case of Belle Larabee, the woman he knew well and who knew him well.

Because he knew her, he had been more forbearing than with any of the others. Because she had exhausted his forbearance, willfully throwing away each new chance she was given, his ultimate attitude toward her was unusually severe. She had a good husband. (None of the other victims had been married.) So it was only just that she should suffer some of the torture he had suffered before she was struck down.

Hence, his deliberate delay in meeting her—a delay that would be a fearsome, worry-filled eternity for her. Thus, his demand for a sum which she could not possibly pay—something which had to be done, yet could not be, and must agonizingly tear her apart as her husband had been torn.

She would come tonight, of course, to beg. He, the Killer would take her back to one of the cabins, and there tell her the price she was to pay. And the dope would be working on her by then, and while she could listen and understand, that would be all she could do. Only listen in paralyzed horror as he pronounced sentence and carried it out:

The loss of the loveliness that she had misused. The loss, insofar as possible, of everything that identified her as a woman. So that she would go to her deserved death as something so hideous that even the sharks would pause before—

The Skeleton jerked fantastically, as it made a sudden start. Part of the bones of its left arm disappeared, as the sleeve of the shroud was pulled up.

A watch glowed in the darkness. The Killer looked at it, grunted in dismayed surprise. Could he have been wrong? Would Bella Larabee fail to come and beg?

No—the skeleton head moved in a firm negative. No, that couldn't be. He knew Belle too well, knew exactly how she would think and act. She would come, all right. In fact, she would have had to be here by now. And that being the case—

The Killer yanked down his sleeve. Angrily, he strode across the patio, stepped through the rear door of the place. His table was obscured by a mass of masqueraders. But he

saw the Witch and the rail-thin Demon. Almost at the same time, the Demon saw him, and he interrupted the Witch's pleading with an urgent nudge—a hasty nod toward the rear door.

The Witch turned around, stood fear-frozen for a moment. Then, at a faltering but anxious pace, she hurried up to the Killer.

"Got her," she mumbled. "Fixed her good, just like you said."

"Did you?" said the Killer. "How long ago?"

"Well, I . . . not very long. Honest, not very long."

"What does that mean?" the Killer asked. "Ten minutes, fifteen, thirty?"

"N-not very long, h-honest. H-honest, n-not v-v-very—"

The Killer looked at her. His hand closed over her arm in a steely grip. "Come," he said coldly. "Come."

Pulling her along with him, he started toward his table, the masqueraders almost frantically falling back to make way for him. At last they were out of the throng, the Killer and the Witch, and into a relatively open space. And there they stopped short. The Witch looking fearfully up at the Killer. The Killer staring incredulously at Eve Whitfield.

This woman? Not the woman who was to die. What in the—

Never mind! *Never mind!* The Killer, the Deity, was just. Always, always just. In punishing the wicked, he was—was he not?—protecting the righteous. Only with this knowledge, this rationalization, could he go about his self-appointed duties. Only thus—and only by permitting, admitting no error. For the hand of the Deity must always be sure, and an erring Deity is no Deity at all.

"You!" he told the Witch. "You get her out of here. *Now!*"

"B-but—but—"

"Say that her party can't see her! Tell her anything! Just get her out!"

The Witch nodded numbly, but she didn't move. She was bewildered, terrified by something in his tone. Incapable of speech or movement.

"Didn't you hear me? If I have to—"

There was a soft thud, the clatter of shattering glass. The Killer's eyes swerved toward the table.

Eve had pitched forward in her chair. Her face half-

turned toward him, her arms limply outspread, she lay crumpled across the smeared top of the table.

The Witch had found her voice at last. What was wrong she didn't know, but she knew the Killer, knew that he did not tolerate wrong. And mumbling incoherently, she pleaded for mercy. And almost sobbed with relief at the evidence of his forgiveness.

He wasn't sore at her, thank God. He couldn't be. For here in her hand was proof positive.

A small white disc. A precious cap, whose crystalline whiteness testified to its purity.

"Have it now," the Killer said gently. "You deserve it."

XXVI

• Morning sunlight streamed through the window of the hospital room, causing the girl in the bed to blink and raise a hand to her eyes. The intern took it away, held it down against the bed with her other hand. Holding her firmly, he nodded to the resident, and the latter began to remove the tube that went up into her nose and down her throat to her stomach.

The girl jerked involuntarily, struggled and gagged at the rasping of the tube. Then, at last it was out, and she lay back weakly in near-exhaustion.

The resident critically examined the contents of the glass receptacle which the tube led into, and which, in turn, was connected to a small electric pump. "Mmm-hmm," he said. "That should do it. What's the score, anyway?"

"Six and six," the intern said. "Six stomach washings, six pumpings."

"Plenty. Very good," the resident nodded. "Now as soon as she has a good breakfast . . ."

The girl groaned at the mention of the word. "Oh, *no!* I can't. I'm just so sore and sleepy and—"

"Breakfast!" A nurse came through the door. "Breakfast, said our true-blue men of mercy, and here it is."

The resident and the intern departed. The nurse cranked

up the bed, firmly spooned oatmeal and soft-boiled eggs into her patient. "This," she declared, "will do us a lot of good. We're weak and depleted, and the food will give us strength."

"Who's us?" said the girl wanly. "All I need is sleep."

"We will now have our coffee," the nurse announced. "We will sleep after Dr. Larabee sees us."

"But I'm dying for sleep! I can't stay awake any longer."

"In that case, we will have a small injection of caffeine in our buttock."

"No! I mean, I don't need it. I can stay awake fine!"

"Make very sure you do," the nurse said. "You will be checked on, just in case."

She nodded primly and departed. Chief Robert Ironside rolled his chair up to the bed.

"We," he said, "will now talk. We will talk rapidly and in the utmost detail, or we will get a large and heavy hand applied to our rear end."

Eve blushed, tried to avoid his stern gaze. "Please, Chief. I just can't. It's a personal matter, and I promised that—"

"You made another promise, too. You swore to it on the day you joined the San Francisco Police Department. You swore that, without reservation or exception, you would faithfully uphold the law at all times."

"I know." Eve bit her lip. "But, Chief—"

"I know where you were last night. Your car was found less than a block away, and it's the only place you could have been. You were almost killed there. Two other people *were* killed. Hotshotted. Someone slipped them caps of cyanide instead of horse. Not a nice way to die, hmm?"

"N-no," Eve said shakily. "Oh, no."

"They were mainliners. Ordinarily, their deaths would have been attributed to an overdose, but thanks to my talk with Dr. Forrester they were correctly diagnosed as poison murders. Now," Ironside concluded. "I can't get anything out of the habitués of that joint. When people get that far down, you can't reach 'em—or not quickly enough, at least, to make an immediate arrest of the killer. The same person, I'm convinced, who tried to kill you and who did kill Eleanor Chisholm and Chuck Glover and God only knows how many others. So that leaves it up to you, Policewoman Eve Whitfield."

Eve swallowed. She said nervously that of course she

wanted to help. But she just didn't see how, she just couldn't believe that the secret she had promised to keep had anything to do with—with—

"I'll consider that your answer," Ironside said curtly. "Hand in your badge, and I'll tell Mark Sanger you'd rather see him rot in prison than break a promise you had no right to make."

He made a motion of turning his chair away. Eve sat up with an indignant cry.

"Now, you just stop that! Don't you dare talk to me that way, you old bear you!"

"Well, then?"

"Well, nothing! You just be quiet and give me a chance to talk!"

XXVII

• Eve talked. Ironside listened. Twice he interrupted with questions, but the rest of the time he was silent. Absorbing the flow of words which slowly but surely filled in the missing portion of the puzzle. He was grateful, naturally; gloriously exultant that the light had been turned on in what had been hopeless darkness. At the same time, he was considerably aggravated that Eve had unwittingly withheld the key to the puzzle by treating police business as a private affair. True, he ran his department pretty informally. True, also, he had always been a sucker for friendship himself. So perhaps her attitude could be traced directly back to him. But—but, *dammit!* That was no excuse for her, not the slightest!

What he did was *his* business, and what *she* did was also his. And what kind of a boss was it who didn't take good care of his people, seeing that no harm befell them? And how could he live up to this responsibility if they did outrageously stupid things? Such as going unassisted into the worst dive in San Francisco to meet a criminal. When he thought about it, about what had almost happened . . .

Eve dead. His Eve. What would life have been like without her?

She finished her story, lay back looking at him nervously. Ironside shook a stern finger at her, momentarily too shaken by her narrow escape from death for speech.

"You!" he exploded, at last. "You should be spanked so hard that you couldn't sit down for a week!"

"Truer words were never spoken," said Dr. John Larabee, as he came briskly through the door. "But I'm afraid she won't be sitting very comfortably as it is, in view of the number of shots she's had."

He took Eve's chart from the end of the bed and studied it. Then, he took her pulse and temperature, and listened to her heart. Removing the stethoscope from his ears, he announced her condition as highly satisfactory—which, by all the rules of logic and medicine, it should not have been.

"Swell," Eve nodded drowsily. "When can I go to sleep, John?"

"Right away, if you're able to. I'll be staying around a little while to make another check on you."

Eve said she was able to go to sleep right away—and proved it. Dr. Larabee tossed the stethoscope into his medical kit, and glanced at Ironside.

"You have some questions to ask me, I imagine, Chief."

"I do, thanks," Ironside said. "You found Eve lying in the hospital parking lot? About what time?"

"A little after ten. Perhaps ten fifteen. I'd just come out of the hospital and was on the way to my car. If I'd been five minutes later, or if I'd parked my car in a slightly different spot . . ." He shook his head grimly. "Well, I don't like to think of what might have happened."

"Nor I," Ironside nodded. "Now, please think carefully, Doctor. Do you remember hearing any other vehicle leaving the lot at the time you discovered Eve or while you were carrying her into the hospital?"

"Well," Larabee hesitated doubtfully. "I just couldn't say for sure. One could have left without the sound registering on me. I was too concerned with Eve to be thinking about anything else."

"That's understandable. If you'd seen anyone familiar to you, such as say an ambulance driver, do you think the fact might have registered on you?"

"Well . . . possibly. But I'm reasonably sure, well *almost* sure that . . ." The doctor hesitated again. "Chief," he said frankly, "I'm just not positive, one way or another."

"I'm thinking of one man in particular, a very busy one seemingly. A driver called Smitty."

"Mmm, Smitty." Larabee pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Sort of a prim type, slight of build? Yes, I think I know the man you mean, and I did see him recently. But whether it was yesterday or the day before, or last night or earlier in the evening, that I'd hesitate to say."

Ironside nodded, started to turn his chair toward the door. "I think I'd better check with the desk. You'll be here for a few minutes yet?"

"I will. Go right ahead and make your check."

"Thank you," Ironside said.

He rolled his chair to the door, and pulled it open. It closed behind him, and he turned into the corridor, almost colliding with District Attorney Wayne Billington.

"Bob, my dear friend, Bob!" exclaimed Billington. "I was hoping to catch you here. How are you, and how is our dear little Eve, and—"

"I'm all right and she's all right, and I'll see you later," Ironside said shortly. "What time were you here at the hospital last night, Wayne?"

"What time was I here?" Billington gave him a startled look. "Why I wasn't here at all. Uh, now the reason I wanted to see you, Bob . . . Coleman Duke asked me to use my good offices to persuade you—"

"Later." Ironside nodded toward Eve's room. "Wait for me."

"Well. I could see you at another time . . ."

"No. Go in there and wait."

He turned away abruptly. Starting up the corridor again, he heard Billington enter the room, heard his jovial cry of greeting for "my dear friend, John."

Ironside smiled grimly, briefly, then went on his way up the hall.

He held a low-voiced conversation with the day head-nurse; also with her nighttime counterpart, who was just going off duty. Some minutes later, he went back down the corridor and reentered Eve's room.

". . . a lovely woman, Belle," Wayne Billington was saying. "Absolutely delightful. So innocent and childlike, yet every inch a woman. Bob," he glanced at Ironside "you've met Mrs. Larabee, haven't you? I was just telling my friend, John, what a lucky man he is."

The chief nodded, noting Larabee's expression. Suspecting rightly that Billington was very far from being a dear friend, and that, except for Belle Larabee's virtually undiscriminating friendliness, the DA would never have crossed the doctor's threshold.

"Doctor," Ironside abruptly cut in on Billington's tasteless accolade, "will it disturb Eve if we talk in here? I'm going to question Wayne at some length about the attempt on her life, and I may need your assistance."

Billington gasped, his mouth dropping open. Larabee suppressed a venomous grin. "It shouldn't disturb her," he declared. "And it doesn't matter if it does. I'd just as soon she didn't sleep too soundly."

"Good. I asked Wayne in the corridor if he was here last night, and he asserted he was not. I am now asking him, in your presence, why he deliberately lied to me."

"B-Bob. . . ." The district attorney's hands fluttered helplessly. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"You heard his question," Larabee said coldly. "Answer it."

"But I wasn't— Oh," Billington groaned, "of course, I was here! Here and at several other hospitals. I got my nights mixed up. You see," he rushed on anxiously, "I thought last night was my bereaved night. For visiting the bereaved, I mean. When I'm not calling on important vot—the ill, I'm giving my condolences to the bereaved or conveying my personal congratulations to those who have been newly blessed with a child. I see so many people in different places in my off-hours that it's easy to be confused as to, uh—"

"Also convenient," Ironside said. "Who were the poor sick souls you saw here last night?"

"Well, I—I couldn't say offhand. I make a daily check of the newspapers, and telephone the various hospital admittance-desks, and— Dammit," snarled Billington, "how can I possibly remember? I see literally hundreds of people in the course of a week!"

"So do I," said Larabee, "and if you were to ask me—"

"Well, I'm not you and I'm not asking! Ah, Bob, for Pete's sake . . ."

"Which of the hospital's entrances and exits did you use?" Ironside asked. "I believe there are six in all, including the emergency exits. Main, side, ambulance—"

"I don't remember! How the hell can I—?"

"How long were you here, and at what time?"

"Don't remember!"

"Strange, very strange," murmured Ironside. "Now, the doctor is a very busy man, too, but I'm sure he can tell me exactly where he was and whom he was with and how long he was with them at any time I name."

"Correct," Larabee said promptly. "Of course," he added, with a great show of fairness, "I have to keep very careful records in a practice as large as mine. There's the matter of proper billing, and the possibility that a bill may be questioned. More importantly, the time of a call may be vital to the patient's health."

"Just so," Ironside nodded. "Wayne, I call your attention to the night Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm was killed. Can you or can you not give me a full account of your movements on that night?"

"Why should I? Why, dammit to hell?"

"Does that mean *No*?"

"You figure it out!"

"I now call your attention to the night Charles Glover was killed. Can you or can you not give me a—"

"*No!*"

"That," Ironside said, "is very unfortunate. Doctor, am I right in assuming that if I asked you the same questions . . ."

"Right! Any man should be able to answer them unless he's hiding something."

"You—!" Billington shook a furious finger at Larabee. "You had better shut up! One more crack like that out of you, and I'll do some cracking!"

"Now, now," Ironside said mildly. "Wayne, your office prosecutes a number of cases of crimes by violence. What happens to the evidence in those cases—the guns, knives, blunt instruments, poisons and so on?"

"You know what happens to it! It's held in custody, until the trial is disposed of one way or another, and until there is no further chance of appeal!"

"Another question. How much chloral hydrate do you have in your present collection?"

"Don't know. Dammit all, Bob—"

"Very unfortunate," Ironside repeated. "Don't you think so, Doctor? Now, if I were to ask you the same question—"

"I could answer it!"

"Then do so," Ironside said.

"W-wha—" Larabee blinked. "What did you—"

Ironside told him to let it go; he had only wanted the doctor's admission that he carried a stock of chloral hydrate.

"But perhaps you can clear up a little puzzle for me, Doctor. Your regular evening rounds of this hospital are made between six and seven p.m. What were you doing here, then, more than three hours later? What was your reason for being here—unless it was to discover Eve lying in the parking lot where you had just left her?"

"B-but—but w-why would I—"

"Because you had intended to kill your wife, and Eve got the lethal dose by mistake. But never mind my conjectures, Doctor. Just answer the questions which I put to Wayne. Just do that, to start with. After that, I shall require you to give me a detailed account of your movements during the past week, and possibly for a long time back. That will be easy for you, I assume," Ironside concluded smoothly, "in view of the very careful records which you keep. Don't you agree, Wayne?"

A beautifully ferocious smile had spread over the district attorney's face. He came slowly to his feet, leered wickedly at Larabee.

"Walked right into it, didn't you?" he purred. "Bob set up a cute little trap for you, and you walked right into it. Bob," he turned to Ironside, "I forgive you for the bad time. It was more than worth it to see this self-righteous, sanctimonious son of a—"

Ironside shouted, "*Look out!*" But it was too late.

The heavy medical kit smashed against Billington's head, knocking him senseless. Larabee hurled the kit at Ironside, simultaneously lunging toward the door.

Ironside ducked. The medical kit whizzed past him and crashed against wall.

Larabee got the door open, started through it. Ironside hoisted himself up by his arms, and dived.

His flying tackle caught the doctor just below the knees. It's momentum carried them both out into the hall, where they rolled and struggled on the tiled floor.

Larabee hammered furiously at Ironside's face and head. The Chief was forced to release one arm to protect himself, holding Larabee by one leg rather than two. With insane strength, Larabee regained his feet; started laboriously up

the corridor dragging Ironside with him. With his free foot he kicked backward savagely. A furious torrent of kicks which landed cruelly and tellingly upon the Chief's head and face.

He fought grimly to hold on. Fought to tighten his grip, even as a kick half-blinded him, and he felt himself losing consciousness. Then, someone was confronting the doctor. Someone who wore handmade shoes, and whose legs were encased in the trousers of a three-hundred-dollar suit. And the kicks ceased as the doctor was forced to fight the new-comer.

He fought hard and effectively, despite the handicap of his imprisoned leg. Ironside could tell that from the sound of things. The vicious smackings of fists against flesh, the grunts and *oofs*. For a time, it even looked like—or rather sounded like—Larabee might be the victor. Then, his opponent connected solidly and there was an explosive *thud*. And the doctor emitted a long "Aaaaah," and went down and out.

XXVIII

• One of Eve's eyes opened. It started to drift shut again, then slowly reopened, the other eye opening with it. She sat up, frowning drowsily at an extremely curious spectacle.

Robert Ironside—with a bloody nose, a split lip and a black eye—was being helped into his wheelchair by Coleman Duke—who had two black eyes, a bloody nose and a large gap in the space formerly occupied by two of his front teeth.

"Whasiss?" Eve mumbled sleepily. "Wha' happen?"

"Mr. Duke and I," Ironside said, "are the ugly artifacts of a very anxious few minutes. Wayne Billington is in the care of the X-ray department, and Dr. Larabee is in the custody of the constabulary."

"'s nice," Eve murmured. "Ver' nice."

And she fell back into the pillows and sleep.

Ironside scowled suddenly, looking up at Coleman Duke.

"Broke your promise, didn't you? Promised there'd be no more tailing, and then went right ahead and did it."

"I promised I'd call my men off," Duke said easily. "I didn't say I wouldn't sort of stick around."

"That's not all either. I told you I never wanted to lay eyes on you again, didn't I? What about that, huh?"

"I must have misunderstood," Duke said innocently. "You actually said you never wanted to see me again?"

"Well . . ." Ironside hesitated. "Well, uh—"

"Never? What, *never*?"

"Well," Ironside said gruffly. "Well, *hardly* ever."

Epilogue

• Seated in his wheelchair, Chief Robert Ironside took a whopping drink of bourbon and water, then glanced into the kitchen from whence came the tantalizing aroma of chili.

Eve Whitfield was tending the chili, and seeing to certain other prandial preparations. At that particular moment, she bent over to look into the oven, causing her dress to hike up in the back. Ironside blushed, quickly averting his eyes.

Settling back in his chair, glass comfortably in hand, he looked about the large living room. Looked contentedly from one guest to another, and drank in the pleasant murmur of their voices.

Nedra Glover was talking animatedly to Coleman Duke. Sergeant Ed Brown and District Attorney Wayne Billington were involved in a heated but happy argument. A somewhat chastened-looking Dr. Forrester was chatting interestedly with Mark Sanger and Mark's new girl friend. The new girl friend had just gotten herself a brand-new job as an office receptionist. Her name was Carol LeMoyne, a beautiful name for a very lovely young lady, and she was positively blooming tonight as she clung possessively to Mark's arm. Ironside caught her eye, held up a looped thumb and finger in an A-OK signal. Carol smiled and blew a kiss at him.

It was quite a party, Ironside thought. Quite a gathering.

And it proved, as nothing else would have, that there was an untapped store of goodness in everyone. Even Dr. Larabee had had good in him, or he would not have risked his life to save Eve's. Even Babe Duke had good in him, good that was now coming to the surface as he labored twelve full hours a day for his father. As for Eleanor McNesmith Chisholm and Chuck Glover, well, doubtless there had been much that was good in them, also. And if someone had tried hard enough and worked hard enough to find it, perhaps . . . well, who knew?

But never mind. Why dwell on gloomy what-might-have-beens in the presence of such pleasant what-was? For here tonight, here was proof that the planer's deadliest and most contumacious of animals could coexist and enjoy it.

Only a short time ago, everyone present at the party had been giving one another a bad time. Making a hard world to live in an even harder one. Yet look at them tonight! Just look and listen to them!

"And the lion shall lie down with the lamb," Ironside thought; and unconsciously his lips moved with the thought.

Hardly a second later, Eve's lips brushed his ear as she whispered to him, "Oh, what you just said!"

Ironside started, let out a defensive snarl. "Huh! What are you poppin' off about now, you silly dame?"

"A Freudian slip if I ever heard one," Eve declared solemnly. "The subconscious manifesting itself in symbols."

Ironside groaned. "For the love of Pete, woman—"

"Let's see now," Eve mused. "The lion represents the man, you, and the lamb is a symbol for . . . got any ideas?"

"Just one," Ironside said. "I got an idea that when people got a good thing going, they shouldn't rock the boat. How does that grab you?"

"Pretty good," Eve said. "For the present, I think I shall quit while I'm ahead."

Ironside said that that was always a good idea.

As, of course, it is.

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